

Gambling, the State and Society in Siam, c. 1880-1945

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Abstract

This study charts the evolution of government attitudes and policies towards gambling in Siam between the 1880s and 1945. Based on the assertion that gambling was a social evil that impoverished the population, encouraged crime, and retarded economic development, successive regimes sought to reduce and regulate the scope for legal gambling. This was expressed most concretely through a series of increasingly restrictive and punitive laws, which prohibited many popular forms of gambling and subjected others to strict licensing. Consequently, there was an increase in illegal gambling. In essence, gambling went from being a state acceptable activity to one that was criminal unless conducted within certain strict parameters. At the same time, the state sought to secure a monopoly over the provision of facilities for gambling in order to ensure it was the only institution that might profit from people's gambling habits.

The central concern of this study is to examine the complex process by which a once socially and state acceptable activity becomes defined as criminal. It shows that the moral and economic arguments against gambling had to be balanced with a host of other concerns and, most crucially, the financial imperatives of the Siamese state. Along with the recognition that gambling was a part of human nature and people would continue to indulge in it regardless of its legality, financial necessity prevented the Siamese state from prohibiting gambling outright. This study also shows how this process was shaped by other state and semi-state institutions – namely the police force, judiciary, penal administration, and Buddhist monkhood – and public opinion. It moves beyond conventional histories of Siam, which portray the monarchy as the sole agent of change, to demonstrate that the criminalisation of gambling was a process in which all parts of Siamese society participated.

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Abbreviations

Thai Archival Documents

B	=	<i>Bettalet</i> (Miscellaneous)
K Kh	=	Office of the Financial Adviser
Kh	=	<i>Krasuang phrakhlung mahasombat</i> (Ministry of Finance)
Kh.Ph	=	<i>Khamphiphaksa</i> (Legal Judgments)
KS	=	<i>Krasuang kaset</i> (Ministry of Agriculture)
M	=	<i>Krasuang mahatthai</i> (Ministry of the Interior)
MT	=	<i>Krasuang mahatthai</i> (Ministry of the Interior, post-1932)
N	=	<i>Krasuang nakhonban</i> (Ministry of Local Government)
NA	=	National Archives of Thailand
R	=	<i>Ratchakan ti ...</i> (the ... Reign)
RL	=	<i>Ratchanulekanukan</i> (Royal Secretariat)
SR	=	<i>Samnak nayok-ratthamontri</i> (Office of Prime Minister's Secretariat)
Y	=	<i>Krasuang yuttitham</i> (Ministry of Justice)

Newspapers

<i>BDM</i>	=	<i>Bangkok Daily Mail</i>
<i>BP</i>	=	<i>Bangkok Post</i>
<i>BT</i>	=	<i>Bangkok Times</i>
<i>BTWM</i>	=	<i>Bangkok Times Weekly Mail</i>
<i>CSW</i>	=	<i>Chino sayam warasap</i>
<i>KDM</i>	=	<i>Krungthep Daily Mail</i>
<i>NT</i>	=	<i>Nangsuphim thai</i>
<i>SO</i>	=	<i>Siam Observer</i>

Other Sources

- PKPS* = Sathian Laiyalak et al. (comps), *Prachum kotmai pracham sok* [Collected Laws in Chronological Order], Bangkok, 1935+, 69 vols.
- RFAB* = Ministry of Finance, *Report of the Financial Adviser upon the Budget of the Kingdom of Siam*, various years.
- RPAB* = *Report on the Police Administration of Bangkok Town, Suburbs and Railway District* (title varies), various dates.
- SY* = Ministry of Finance, Department of Commerce and Statistics (name varies), *Statistical Yearbook of the Kingdom of Siam* (title varies), 1916+.

Editorial Note

Transcription

Thai names and words have been transcribed using the 'General System of Phonetic Transcription of Thai Characters into Roman' devised by the Royal Institute and set out in the *Journal of the Thailand Research Society*, 33, 1 (March 1941), pp. 49-53. However, diacritics have not been employed. Following this system, the aspirated consonants *k*, *p* and *t* are written as *kh*, *ph* and *th*; the Thai word *thua* should thus be pronounced roughly like the English word *tour*. Proper names of well-known people have been spelt according to the preference of that person, where known, or according to common usage: for instance, Vajiravudh instead of Wachirawut, and Devawongse rather than Thewawong. Official spelling has been used for all place names.

Names, Ranks and Titles

Following convention, Thai people are referred to by their first name and this is how they are listed in the bibliography. Various titles are used for royalty and these indicate the generational descent of a particular member of the royal family. Under the absolute monarchy, members of the royal family that entered government service were also granted a rank. In this study, the children and grandchildren of kings have been referred to simply as princes or princesses. Until the absolute monarchy was abolished in 1932, bureaucrats and military officers were granted the following ranks in ascending order: *khun*, *luang*, *phra*, *chao phraya* and, very rarely, *somdet chao phraya*. Individuals were also given a title, which was commonly used in place of their actual name, and this is how they are referred to in the text. For example, Pan

Sukhum is referred to as Chao Phraya Yomarat. Many retained these titles as surnames following the 1932 coup, most notably Luang Phibunsongkhram (Plaek Khitasangka).

Until 1939, Thailand was known as Siam. In the text, the country is referred to by the name which was in use at the particular time being discussed. The terms Siamese and Thai have been used more interchangeably, however.

Dates and Periods

During the period covered by this study, two different dating systems were used: the Bangkok Era (*rattanakosin sok*, abbreviated to r. s.) and the Buddhist Era (B. E., or in Thai *phutthasakkarat*, abbreviated to p. s.). The former ran from the founding of Bangkok in 1782. In 1911, it was replaced by the Buddhist Era, which is 543 years ahead of the Western calendar. Traditionally, the Thai year ran from 1 April to 31 March. Therefore, the year R. S. 111 was equivalent to 1 April 1892 to 31 March 1893 and in the text is written as 1892/3. Similarly, February B. E. 2478 (1935/6) was February 1936. In B. E. 2483 (1940), the start of the year was changed to 1 January, meaning that particular year was only 9 months long (from 1 April 1940 to 31 December 1940).

The reigns of each of the nine kings in the present dynasty (the Chakri dynasty) are numbered according to where a particular king comes in the dynastic sequence. As in other studies of modern Thai history, the reign of Rama III is thus sometimes referred to in the text as the Third Reign and that of Chulalongkorn is the Fifth Reign, for instance.

Introduction

“Gambling places were allowed at one time,” Phloi said.
 “Then they were banned and if you got caught you could
 be sent to jail. Now they’re back to being legal and
 respectable again. Why, Khun Luang? What’s the reason
 for the change? Which government was right, or wrong?”
 “The world turns and turns, Mae Phloi. The pendulum
 swings. Let us enjoy our roast duck.”

Kukrit Pramoj, *Four Reigns*¹

It is World War Two Thailand and Phloi, the heroine of Kukrit Pramoj’s historical novel *Four Reigns* (*Si phaen-din*), is in her twilight years. Born in 1882 to a wealthy nobleman and his minor wife, she has led a sheltered existence; her life revolving first around the Inner Court of the Grand Palace, where she was sent at the age of ten, and then, once married to an up-and-coming palace official, her family and home. Nevertheless, Phloi has witnessed a bewildering array of events that have transformed the traditional, semi-feudal kingdom of Siam into the modernising, nation-state of Thailand: the reigns of four successive monarchs, as indicated by the novel’s title; the 1893 Paknam crisis in which France sent gunboats up the Chaophraya River to Bangkok in order to force the Siamese government into surrendering its claims to the territory of present-day Laos, perhaps the closest the kingdom came to outright colonisation; the much-celebrated administrative, fiscal and legal reforms of King Chulalongkorn (1868-1910), who is widely credited with securing Siam’s independence and laying the foundations of the modern Thai state; the controversial reign of King Vajiravudh (1910-25), during which her husband, Prem, rose to prominence within the court; Siam’s entry into the First World War on the side of the

¹ Kukrit Pramoj, *Four Reigns* (*Si phaen-din*), English version by Tulachandra, Chiang Mai: Silkworm Books, 1998 [1953, 1981], p. 629.

Allies in 1917, and the sending of an expeditionary force to France; the impact of the world-wide economic depression of the early 1930s; the 1932 coup by a handful of military and civilian officials, including one of Phloi's sons, who overthrew the last absolute monarch, King Prajadhipok (1925-35) and established a constitutional democracy; the 1933 failed royalist revolt led by Prince Boworadet, in which another of her sons took part and was imprisoned for many years as a result; the military's subsequent usurpation of political power under the strongman, Luang Phibunsongkhram (Phibun); the country's change of name from Siam to Thailand in 1939; the war with French Indochina in 1940-41 that resulted in the regaining of the 'lost' territories in Laos and Cambodia; the alliance with Japan that quickly turned into an occupation; and, most recently, Thailand's 1942 declaration of war against Britain and the United States, leading to the Allied bombing raids on Bangkok that destroyed Phloi's home. Throughout her life, Phloi has borne such misfortunes with good grace and Buddhist stoicism. Indeed, she is 'the embodiment of those ideal, genteel values most Thais still hold dear'.² However, she has only a limited understanding of what has gone on around her. As Marcel Barang puts it, Phloi 'has seen too much and understood too little'.³ Her bemusement at the about-turns in government policy on gambling is a good illustration of this. But her reaction is also understandable, for government attitudes towards gambling had continually shifted throughout her lifetime and were often contradictory, hypocritical and inconsistent.

Until the late nineteenth century, public gambling houses could be found throughout Siam. These were run by tax farmers, mostly Chinese, who paid the government substantial sums for the right. Indeed, the revenue they provided was crucial in funding Chulalongkorn's reforms. Nevertheless, in 1887 that king initiated

² Marcel Barang (comp.), *The 20 Best Novels of Thailand*, Bangkok: Thai Modern Classics, 1994, p. 285.

³ Ibid.

a policy of gradually closing the gambling houses – a policy, it will be argued, that was motivated by a mix of humanitarian and social concerns, a need to enhance the population's productivity, and a desire to show the West that the leadership of Siam was enlightened and civilised. Due to financial constraints, however, the gambling houses were not completely abolished until 1917. Concomitantly, the games that had been played therein were prohibited. In their absence, people turned to other forms of gambling: betting on horse-racing and billiards were the crazes of the 1920s, for instance, but Siamese and Chinese games also remained popular. All of these were regulated by a series of increasingly restrictive and punitive laws, culminating in the Gambling Act B. E. 2478, which was issued in 1936 and is still in force today. During the 1930s, the first state lotteries were started and they also remain a feature of present-day Thailand. To ensure their success, other organisations were prohibited from issuing their own lotteries. In short, the state sought to establish a monopoly on the provision of large-scale gambling facilities. As part of this policy, the government experimented with state-owned casinos, the first opening in the south in 1939 and others in Bangkok during the closing stages of the war. All were short-lived; the last were closed in 1945 and the experiment abandoned. It is from one of the Bangkok casinos that Phloi's brother, Phoem, has just returned triumphantly, his winnings having purchased the roast duck the siblings are enjoying in the quotation. His answer to her questions is based on the Buddhist tenet that everything is impermanent. It also implies that as societies evolve so too do attitudes towards gambling. Jan McMillen sums up this process in more technical terms: 'Periodic reformulations of the relation between gambling and society have been related to culturally and historically accepted definitions of what gambling is, influenced by fluctuating conceptions of

morality which reflect prevailing social and political-economic conditions.’⁴ The about-turns and shifts in the Siamese government’s attitudes and policies towards gambling were intimately linked with those era-defining events witnessed by Phloi. Charting the swing of the pendulum is the purpose of this study.

Definitions of Gambling

The first question that needs to be addressed is: what is gambling? There is no straightforward answer. The crux of the problem is that gambling is ‘virtually a universal phenomenon in human societies’, occurring ‘in nearly all cultures and in every period of time’.⁵ This leads McMillen to observe that:

Despite its apparent universality, the concept of gambling has no intrinsic meaning; rather, its meaning always depends on the socio-historical context in which it occurs. The perception and experience of gambling vary significantly – in its history, its organisation and its meanings – according to different types of gambling, the various groups involved, and the particular society within which the gambling takes place.⁶

In a modern, capitalist context, gambling is usually defined in terms of a financial transaction. Roger Munting offers the following definition from the 1978 Rothschild Committee report: ‘Gambling consists of an agreement between parties with respect to an unascertained outcome that, depending on the outcome, there will be a redistribution of advantage (usually but not always monetary) among those parties.’⁷ This uncertain outcome might be decided by the skill of the parties, by pure chance, or by a combination of the two. In Thai, the word for gambling is *kanphanan*.⁸ A

⁴ Jan McMillen, ‘Understanding Gambling: History, concepts and theories’ in Jan McMillen (ed.), *Gambling Cultures: Studies in History and Interpretation*, London: Routledge, 1996, p. 7.

⁵ Ibid., p. 6.

⁶ Ibid. For a discussion of what gambling means in a Western context see Roger Munting, *An Economic and Social History of Gambling in Britain and the USA*, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1996, pp. 1-5.

⁷ Munting, *Economic and Social History*, p. 3.

⁸ Broadly speaking, *kanphanan* also subsumes the term *khanto* meaning to bet. It seems that *khanto* is rarely used outside legal codes and texts. Mannot Sutthiwatthanapphrut, *Kham athibai pramuan kotmai phaeng lae phanit wa duai yumphaksap kepkhong nai khlangsinkha pranipranom yomkhwam*

survey of Thai legal commentaries, encyclopaedias and dictionaries on the term *kanphanan* indicates that in a contemporary context its meaning is essentially the same as the definition given above. These sources make it explicit that both parties involved in the transaction must have a chance of both winning and losing.⁹ For example, offering someone a prize for doing well in their exams before they have sat those exams is not gambling because the examinee can only gain, while the other person can only lose.

In the past, however, the Siamese state's perception of what constituted gambling was broader and more nebulous than the preceding definition; indeed, examining how this definition was reached is a part of this study. None of the four principal gambling laws issued in the period covered by this study, nor the Civil and Commercial Code, contains an explicit and precise definition. While reviewing the draft of one of these laws in 1928, the Minister of Justice alluded to the reasons behind this omission by noting that the word 'gambling' was particularly difficult to explain.¹⁰ The lack of a clear legal definition meant it was the judiciary that ultimately had to determine what exactly constituted gambling. Rather than define gambling, the Siamese state preferred to identify the media through which people gambled. In many cases, the act of gambling and the means of doing it were virtually synonymous. Perhaps, the best example of this was the Gambling Revenue Act R. S. 120, which stated that, for the purposes of this particular law, gambling meant engaging in any of the games or activities listed in the accompanying regulations for

kanphanan lae khanto [Explanation of the Civil and Commercial Code concerning borrowing and depositing property, reconciliation and compromise, consent, gambling and betting], 2nd ed., Bangkok: Ramkhamhaeng University Press, 1975, p. 262.

⁹ Ibid., pp. 262-3; Thanongsak Thinsinuan, 'Kotmai kieokap kanphanan [Laws about Gambling]', MA thesis, Faculty of Law, Thammasat University, 1986, p. 85; Institute of Linguistics (comp.), *Potthanukrom chabap luang* [Government Dictionary], np, nd, p. 402; *Saranukromthai chabap ratchabanditthayasathan* [Thai Encyclopaedia: National Bar Association edition], vol. 20, Bangkok: Thaimitkanphim, 1975-6, pp. 12653-4.

¹⁰ NA R.7 Kh.2/2, 'Extract from the Council of Ministers meeting, 18 Aug. 1928'.

property of value.¹¹ Each of the main gambling laws split the most common games and other means of gambling into two broad groups: those that were totally prohibited and those that were permitted subject to license, initially from the tax farmers and later from the state. These groups included contests determined by varying degrees of skill – cockfighting, boat races, pitching coins, and some card games, for instance – and others based on chance – dice games, various forms of lotteries, and such like. Some of these activities might not commonly be considered gambling in a Western context: for example, target shooting and throwing hoops over prizes, seemingly innocuous activities usually found at fairgrounds, consistently appeared in gambling legislation. Indeed, setting up stalls to operate the latter was banned in 1883/4 and decriminalised only in 1902.¹² Clearly, the Siamese state's historical conception of gambling diverges from the modern, Western-derived one.

The Criminality of Gambling

Before considering why gambling or, perhaps more accurately, certain forms of gambling are criminalised, it is worth examining what crime is. Like some of its practitioners, crime as a concept is a slippery and shady character, and notoriously difficult to pin down.¹³ It is generally recognised that crime is not a fixed category but rather a social construct that is both culturally and temporally relative; indeed, it is often said that crime lies in the eyes of the beholder.¹⁴ Honour killings, for instance, have been tolerated by many cultures, including upper-class English society; in some

¹¹ *PKPS*, 18, p. 276.

¹² *PKPS*, 10, pp. 129-30; *PKPS*, 18, p. 254.

¹³ For a contemporary overview of the problems of defining crime, see Stephen Jones, *Criminology*, 3rd ed., Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006, pp. 31-41.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 38; Anand A. Yang, 'Introduction – Issues and Themes in the Study of Historical Crime and Criminality: Passages to the Social History of British India' in Anand A. Yang (ed.), *Crime and Criminality in British India*, Tuscon, Arizona: University of Arizona Press, 1985, p. 2. See also Ted Robert Gurr, Peter N. Grabosky and Richard C. Hula, *The Politics of Crime and Conflict: A Comparative History of Four Cities*, Beverley Hills, California: Sage Publications, 1977, pp. 11-14.

countries, they remain so today but in others such killings are now considered criminal acts. Conceptions of criminality are thus dependent on the political, economic, social, and cultural context in which they arise. As societies evolve, then so too do attitudes towards certain actions and modes of behaviour. In a modern context, and at the most basic, essential level of definition, a crime is any action or form of behaviour that is proscribed by law. Indeed, some would say that crime is a product of the law; it cannot exist independently.¹⁵ This is not the place for an in-depth discussion of these issues. It suffices to note that criminalisation and lawmaking are merely two terms for opposite sides of the same coin. Any study of criminal behaviour must therefore examine the process by which the laws governing that behaviour came into being.

The definition of crime can be refined further: crimes are acts proscribed by law because the state perceives them to be injurious to individuals and the wider society. Gambling is often described as a 'victimless' crime, a term that disguises the potential damage that might arise from unrestricted indulgence. For instance, the gambler's habit might lead them into debt and destitution; this has ramifications for not only the gambler and their dependents but also for the community in which they live. To feed their family or perhaps just their habit, the gambler might turn to crimes such as theft or fraud. The modern state thus has two justifications for criminalising gambling: first, it has a duty to protect people from self-harm, and second, it is responsible for the prevention of crime.¹⁶

The social origins of criminal law – in other words, how criminal behaviour is determined and defined – has long been a subject of debate among criminologists and social historians. One dominant argument is that crimes are acts that threaten the

¹⁵ For a critique of this argument see Jones, *Criminology*, pp. 31-4.

¹⁶ Pasuk Phongpaichit, Sungsidh Piriyaangsan and Nualnoi Treerat, *Guns, Girls, Gambling, Ganja: Thailand's Illegal Economy and Public Policy*, Chiang Mai: Silkworm, 1998, p. 215.

interests and values of powerful groups within society. In short, laws are made by elites in the interests of elites. This interpretation is termed conflict theory. On the other hand, an older and more traditional view holds that crimes are acts which transgress universal norms of conduct. Criminal law is thus the embodiment of a moral consensus within a particular society. This is termed the functional or, more commonly, consensus theory of crime.¹⁷ Rather than seeing them as two contending models it is perhaps better to consider them as the opposite ends of a sliding scale, with specific crimes falling somewhere between the two. In their 1970s study of crime and civil strife in four cities – London, Stockholm, Sydney, and Calcutta – during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Ted Robert Gurr and others sought to overcome the then perceived dichotomy between these two interpretations. They found that the crimes on which there was the greatest degree of consensus in all four societies were those against the person – principally, murder and assault – and crimes of acquisition.¹⁸ Along with other studies, theirs also indicated that activities such as drug-taking and gambling fall towards the conflict end of the spectrum: the large number of people that continue to take part in these activities once they are criminalised shows there is a lack of consensus.¹⁹

Moreover, in their attempt to delineate the precise role of political elites in defining criminality, Gurr et al. highlight the various influences and latent constraints to which elites are subject. Firstly, as members of a particular society, elites share certain values and beliefs, but not necessarily all, with other members, which they are expected to uphold and adhere to. Elites also have to contend with the concerns of those institutions responsible for the maintenance of law and order, namely, the

¹⁷ For a discussion of conflict and consensus theories see Gurr et al., *Politics of Crime and Conflict*, p. 13; Jones, *Criminology*, pp. 34-41.

¹⁸ Gurr et al., *Politics of Crime and Conflict*, pp. 683, 697-8.

¹⁹ Ibid., pp. 14, 681-2; Pasuk et al., *Guns, Girls, Gambling, Ganja*, p. 216. See also Jones, *Criminology*, pp. 36-7.

police, the judiciary and the penal administration. Bureaucratic inertia, indifference and even resistance can also act as powerful constraints. Lastly, there may be external pressure for change from the press, special interest groups, and the general public. Gurr et al. conclude that 'it is too simplistic to maintain that changing policies of public order are merely manifestations of an elite's class interests or narrow desire to retain power.'²⁰ Laws may be made by elites but they are moulded for and by society. To fully understand why some acts are criminalised it is thus necessary to examine the attitudes and perceptions of all the various social groups, not just the governing elite.

In his work on the shifting attitudes towards off-course betting on horses-races in England and Wales between the 1890s and the 1930s, David Dixon also stresses the need to broaden the scope of inquiry in lawmaking studies; it is not enough to focus solely on the enactment of criminal legislation by senior legislatures. Firstly, attention must also be paid to the role of subordinate lawmakers and the judiciary who, through court decisions, 'contribute crucially to the process out of which statutory enactments are produced.'²¹ Secondly, the subsequent processes of enforcement, interpretation, and implementation also need to be examined. Just because a law was promulgated does not mean it was enforced. Moreover, the judiciary might interpret the law in a way that is at odds with the original intentions of the lawmakers. To sum up, Dixon asserts that: 'Law-making has to be seen not as a single event, but as a *process* in which groups and individuals interact, in which the meanings of legislative initiatives change, in which ideologies and commitments vary and shift.'²²

²⁰ Gurr et al., *Politics of Crime and Conflict*, p. 678.

²¹ David Dixon, *From Prohibition to Regulation: Bookmaking, Anti-Gambling, and the Law*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991, p. 28.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 29.

This present study seeks to incorporate all these theoretical guidelines and methodological concerns in order to present a comprehensive account of the development of the Siamese state's attitudes and policies towards gambling. In doing so, it explores the complex process by which a once socially and state acceptable activity, namely gambling, becomes criminalised. It seeks to place the Siamese ruling elite of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in their political and socio-economic context so that their underlying motives for restricting gambling can be fully understood. The roles of state and semi-state institutions – namely, the police force, the judiciary, the penal administration, and the Buddhist monkhood (*sangha*) – along with public opinion, are also examined. Besides providing insights into how laws are made and criminal behaviour defined in a modern Asian context, such an approach also has many benefits for the development of Thai historiography.

Gambling and Thai Historiography

Conventional historiography on modern Siam/Thailand has long suffered from a number of innate and largely unquestioned assumptions that have limited the boundaries of historical inquiry.²³ These stem from the fact that Siam was never directly colonised; as such, the country is deemed to be unique within South East Asia and, indeed, most of the non-Western world. Perhaps unsurprisingly, this supposed uniqueness has only served to limit comparative studies. Siam's avoidance of direct colonisation is generally attributed to the benevolent and farsighted leadership of its absolute monarchs, the exemplar being King Chulalongkorn, whose widespread governmental reforms, modelled on Western lines, transformed the

²³ These assumptions and problems were first elucidated by Benedict Anderson in his seminal work on Thai studies. See Benedict Anderson, 'The State of Thai Studies: The State of Thai Studies' in Eliezer B. Ayal (ed.), *The Study of Thailand: Analyses of Knowledge, Approaches, and Prospects in Anthropology, Art History, Economics, History and Political Science*, Papers in International Studies, Southeast Asia Series 54, Athens, Ohio: Ohio University, 1978, pp. 193-8.

traditional state into a modernising, highly centralised one. Siam's kings were thus enshrined as heroic, modernising nationalists: symbols of Thai ingenuity and independence. This royalist interpretation remains the paradigm of Thai historiography, due in part to the reverence in which the current monarch, King Bhumibol Adulyadej, is held, the moral authority he wields, and his symbolic power as a unifying figure. This master narrative was also reinforced and legitimated by the work of numerous Western scholars, such as David Wyatt and Walter Vella, during the 1960s and 1970s.²⁴ Imbued with the anti-colonial sentiment and pro-indigenous sympathies common among South East Asianists at the time, these scholars uncritically adopted the established monarchs-as-nationalists narrative.²⁵ Moreover, they showed an inclination towards the 'Great Man' theory of history, their studies focusing almost exclusively on the reigns or policies of a particular king.²⁶ The net effect is that Siam's absolute monarchs have been given an overwhelming centrality within Thai historiography and are commonly depicted as the sole agents of change, at the expense of other Siamese institutions and social groups.

This conventional, royalist historiography has not gone unchallenged, however. During the 1950s and again in the 1970s, Thai Marxists highlighted Siam's loss of economic sovereignty and the absolute monarchy's collusion with foreign economic interests to argue that those kings 'modernised' the government only so far as it allowed them to consolidate their power, and in so doing they condemned the

²⁴ David K. Wyatt, *The Politics of Reform in Thailand: Education in the Reign of King Chulalongkorn*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 1969; Walter F. Vella, *Chaiyo! King Vajiravudh and the Development of Thai Nationalism*, Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1978.

²⁵ Anderson, 'Studies of the Thai State', p. 196.

²⁶ In addition to Wyatt, *Politics of Reform*; and Vella, *Chaiyo!* see also Benjamin A. Batson, *The End of the Absolute Monarchy in Siam*, Singapore: Oxford University Press, 1984; and Stephen L. W. Greene, *Absolute Dreams: Thai Government Under Rama VI, 1910-1925*, Bangkok: White Lotus, 1999.

country to a semi-colonial status and economic backwardness.²⁷ Rather than being an enlightened institution acting for the greater good of the incipient Thai nation, the absolute monarchy is portrayed as self-serving, exploitative and oppressive. Furthermore, these scholars challenged the centrality of Siam's kings within the historical narrative by concentrating on class struggle and socio-economic factors as the determinants of change. However, like the royalist scholars before them, the Thai Marxists tended to ignore the mass population; the common man appears in the historical narrative only as the subject of changes imposed from on high or without. Recently, though, a number of studies have turned the spotlight upon other actors. For instance, Matthew Copeland and Scott Barmé have focused upon the emergent, Bangkok-based middle class of the 1920s, using the rapidly proliferating print media of the time as their sources.²⁸ Barmé, in particular, has highlighted how this middle class began to wield an increasing influence over Siamese cultural life and, indeed, acted as agents of modernity.²⁹ Similarly, in her study of the legal reform process that led to the promulgation of Siam's modern law codes in the early twentieth century, Tamara Loos has drawn attention to the transnational character of this process and the previously underestimated role of foreign legal advisers.³⁰ Moreover, she attempts to decentralise the monarchy as the prime agent of Thai history through her examination of the debate on polygamy. Although Vajiravudh and Prajadhipok both wished to abolish this practice, the entrenched opposition of other members of the elite prevented them from doing so. Rather than being omnipotent, the absolute monarchy

²⁷ For a discussion of these critical discourses, see Craig J. Reynolds and Hong Lysa, 'Marxism in Thai Historical Studies', *Journal of Asian Studies*, 43, 1 (Nov. 1983), pp. 77-104; and Thongchai Winichakul, 'The Changing Landscape of the Past: New Histories in Thailand since 1973', *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, 26, 1 (March 1995), pp. 104-7.

²⁸ Matthew Copeland, 'Contested Nationalism and the 1932 Overthrow of the Absolute Monarchy in Siam', PhD dissertation, Australian National University, 1993; Scott Barmé, *Woman, Man, Bangkok: Love, Sex and Popular Culture in Thailand*, Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 2002.

²⁹ Barmé, *Woman, Man, Bangkok*, pp. 9-11, 254-5.

³⁰ Tamara Loos, *Subject Siam: Family, Law and Colonial Modernity in Thailand*, Ithaca and London, Cornell University Press, 2006, pp. 3-4, 47-63.

is thus revealed as just one powerful actor among many. Lastly, Loos notes that “the king” more often than not operated as shorthand for a much more complex and contingent decision making process’ in which other members of the Siamese elite may have taken the initiative.³¹

This present study is part of this attempt to correct some of the biases of conventional Thai historiography and go beyond its confines. Principally, by using the methodological framework for lawmaking studies outlined in the previous section, this study will illustrate how the Siamese government’s legislation and policies on gambling were the result of a complex interaction between the political elite, the state institutions responsible for enforcing, implementing and interpreting the law, and the mass population. Examining the lawmaking process also reveals some of the complex relationships underpinning Siamese society: between the centralising Bangkok state and its agents, for example, or between government officials and the common people. Additionally, a study of gambling has much to tell us about Siamese/Thai conceptions of leisure and morality, for instance. Indeed, gambling is a prism through which the light of historical inquiry can be shone to illuminate various facets of a particular society. Finally, by detailing the process that culminated in the 1936 gambling law and the establishment of the state lotteries, both of which remain in place today, this study provides an historical perspective on the Thai government’s present stance on gambling, which, but for a few tightly regulated exceptions such as betting on horse-racing, is to all intents and purposes illegal. Needless to say, illicit gambling operations are commonplace throughout the kingdom and proposals for relaxing the gambling laws so that the government might

³¹ Ibid., p. 184.

profit from gambling's taxation are regularly touted.³² In short, gambling remains a prominent and highly divisive issue in twenty-first century Thailand.

Precious little academic research has been done on the legal or social history of gambling in Siam. Indeed, there only are two works, both in Thai, devoted solely to the subject. The first of these, *Ruang tamnan kanloek bonbia lae huai* [The Abolition of Gambling Dens and the *huai* Lottery], was written by Prince Damrong Rachanuphap, a half-brother of Chulalongkorn and the so-called 'father of Thai history'.³³ In his position as the Minister of the Interior from 1892 to 1915, Damrong was a key architect of the administrative reforms of the Siamese state. He was also president of an Anti-Gambling League, set up to press for the abolition of the gambling tax farms.³⁴ As Chapter 2 will show, Damrong played a decisive role in shaping the absolute monarchy's policy on gambling, often suggesting particular initiatives and overseeing the drafting of new legislation. His study of the gambling tax farms, which was first published in 1919/20 and subsequently revised in 1922/23, is very much a reflection of his multiple roles as member of royalty, former government minister, dedicated recorder of the past, and anti-gambler.³⁵ It is primarily descriptive: detailing the Chinese origins of the games played in the public gambling houses and the *huai* lottery; their introduction into Siam; the methods of

³² For reports on illicit gambling operations see for instance the *Bangkok Post* (hereafter *BP*), 24 April & 3 July 2004. On deregulation see the *Bangkok Post*, 28 March & 11 June 2004. For a study of illegal gambling and contemporary attitudes towards it see Pasuk et al., *Guns, Girls, Gambling, Ganja*, Chs 2, 3, 4 & 10.

³³ It is said that Damrong was the first indigenous scholar to employ Western historiographical methodologies, principally the critical analysis of all extant sources, in the writing of Thai history. During the latter part of his life, he sought to compile and publish as much information on the culture, history and institutions of Siam as possible. Having been educated in both Western and classical Siamese scholarship, Damrong and his work can be viewed as a bridge between traditional and modern conceptions of history. For a detailed discussion of his work see Kennon Breazeale, 'A Transition in Historical Writing: The Works of Prince Damrong Rachanuphap', *Journal of the Siam Society*, 59, 2 (July 1971), pp. 25-49.

³⁴ *Bangkok Times Weekly Mail* (hereafter *BTWM*), 15 June 1904.

³⁵ The revised edition has been used in this study. Prince Damrong Rachanuphap, *Ruang tamnan kanloek bonbia lae huai* [The Abolition of the Gambling Dens and the *huai* Lottery], Cremation Volume for Thongyu Phatphongphanit, Bangkok: 1960.

playing and betting on these games; the organisation and management of the respective tax farms; and the reasons, process and constraints in their abolition. Little attention is paid to the socio-economic changes the country was undergoing at the time. For Damrong, the only virtue of the dens and the *huai* lottery was that they were a highly effective and convenient means of indirect taxation, providing the state with revenue for administrative purposes without unduly burdening the Siamese population. As for their disadvantages, these were numerous: it sufficed to say that gambling impoverished the people and corrupted their character.³⁶ Damrong's study thereby justifies both the existence of the gambling tax farms and their abolition; indeed, it can be seen as state propaganda. By emphasising the amount of revenue the government sacrificed in abolishing the gambling tax farms,³⁷ Damrong propagates the image of an altruistic and enlightened absolute monarchy. Abolition becomes emblematic of Siam's transition to modernity.

The second study, 'Nayobai khongratthaban kieokap phasi-akonkanphanan, p. s. 2367-2460 [Government Policy Towards Gambling Taxes, 1824-1917]' is a master's thesis by Kanchana Chintakanon.³⁸ While it is a much more extensive and comprehensive work than Damrong's study, it still looks at gambling solely from the perspective of tax farming. Nevertheless, Kanchana places the development, expansion, and gradual abolition of the various gambling tax farms in a broader historical context. She illustrates how their expansion was linked to the increasing levels of Chinese immigration throughout the nineteenth century, changes to the fiscal basis of the Siamese state due to the decline in the Chinese junk trade during the first half of the nineteenth century and the restrictions placed on customs duties

³⁶ Ibid., pp. 89-92.

³⁷ Ibid., pp. 52, 88.

³⁸ Kanchana Chintakanon, 'Nayobai khongratthaban kieokap phasi-akonkanphanan, p. s. 2367-2460 [Government Policy Towards Gambling Taxes, 1824-1917]', MA thesis, Sinlapakon University, 1987.

under the so-called 'unequal' treaties signed with the Western powers in the mid-nineteenth century, and increases in state expenditure on defence and on the reforms of state administration in the second half of the century. The implication is that the existence of the gambling tax farms was primarily due to the immigrant Chinese and the colonial threat, thereby absolving the Siamese government of responsibility for the social damage caused by gambling. With regards to their abolition, Kanchana highlights a variety of reasons behind the government's policy, such as the inefficiency of the tax farming system and mounting social problems. But the key factor for Kanchana was the growing economic might of the Chinese tax farmers, which, against the backdrop of nationalist unrest in early twentieth century China, the Siamese political elite found threatening. Abolition is thus portrayed as a strategy for curtailing Chinese power.

Of all the English-language studies on modern Thai history, only Ian Brown's *The Creation of the Modern Ministry of Finance in Siam, 1885-1910* deals with government policy on gambling in any depth.³⁹ As the title implies, the gradual abolition of the gambling tax farms is related to the wider fiscal reforms of the Siamese state. Significantly, all three studies cover the period only to the closure of the last public gambling houses in 1917. From then, it is almost as if gambling within Siam drops off the historical radar. Studies of gambling in a more contemporary setting, meanwhile, deal with the historical context only in passing.⁴⁰ Given the importance of the inter-war period for the development of the government's policy on gambling and its implications for today, this is a serious omission. A perusal of the more general histories of Thailand, however, reveals countless fleeting references to

³⁹ Ian Brown, *The Creation of the Modern Ministry of Finance in Siam, 1885-1910*, London: MacMillan, 1992, pp. 23-4, 88-92.

⁴⁰ Pasuk et al., *Guns, Girls, Gambling, Ganja*, pp. 14-15, 46-8; Thanongsak, [Laws about Gambling], pp. 77-81.

the economic, social and criminal dimensions of gambling.⁴¹ Like furtive underground gambling operations, the subject of gambling has been lurking in the shadows of Thai history. This study brings it into the light.

Overview of the Study

Chapter 1 establishes the socio-economic context to the Siamese government's policy towards gambling that was initiated in the late 1880s. It accounts for the expansion of the gambling tax farms during the nineteenth century, how they were managed, and how some of the games they covered were played. It also analyses the Siamese elite's motivation and rationale for the restrictionist policy initiated during the last decades of the nineteenth century. Besides the inefficiency of the tax farming system in general, the government objected to gambling on the grounds that it was a social evil that impoverished the Siamese population, encouraged crime, and retarded economic development. It is argued that this last concern was paramount: the Siamese elite saw the restriction of gambling as a way of reducing debt slavery and freeing up the labour force for intensive rice cultivation. In other words, it was about making the country more competitive in the international market. Chapter 2 is the first of two chronological chapters detailing the Siamese government's gambling policy between the late 1880s and 1945. It examines how the government implemented the gradual closure of the gambling houses, starting in 1888 and finishing in 1917, and the abolition of the *huai* lottery in 1916, while also looking at the various gambling laws enacted during this period. Chapter 3 looks at the government's responses to new forms of gambling, such as betting on horse-racing and billiards, that sprang up in the 1920s and 1930s. It also details the drafting and enactment of the gambling laws

⁴¹ See for instance David K. Wyatt, *Thailand: A Short History*, 2nd ed., New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2003, pp. 169, 171, 177, 190; Chris Baker and Pasuk Phongpaichit, *A History of Thailand*, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005, pp. 34, 40, 48, 52, 53, 66, 75, 91, 131, 171.

issued in 1930 and 1936, the establishment of the first state lotteries in the mid-1930s, and the short-lived casino experiment during the Second World War. The central argument of these two chapters is that the Siamese government's attitude towards gambling was dictated primarily by financial considerations, its tolerance of gambling fluctuating with its economic fortunes. Chapter 4 looks at how Siam's gambling laws were enforced and violations punished. In doing so, the influence of the police, the judiciary, and the penal administration in shaping government policy is evaluated. The role of the Buddhist monkhood (*sangha*) is also considered. Chapter 5 examines the debates on gambling and critiques of government policy espoused in the expanding popular press, focusing in particular on the decade before the 1932 coup. An attempt is also made to consider popular attitudes towards gambling and government policy. The Conclusion tries to put the depiction of gambling in Siam, by both the government and the press, into perspective. It also fast forwards to twenty-first century Thailand to examine the existing situation regarding gambling and to consider what the past can tell us about the present.

A Note on Sources

A wide variety of sources have been used in this study, the majority of which are in Thai and are held in the National Archives of Thailand in Bangkok. These archival materials include correspondence between the king and his ministers, reports of ministerial and – following the 1932 coup – cabinet meetings, the annual reports of the Bangkok police department and the Ministry of Justice, files from the foreign Financial Advisers, anonymous letters – usually complaining of illegal activities or the corrupt practices of government officials – from members of the public to the administration, and newspaper clippings collected by the government.

Special mention should be made to some important published collections of official documents used in this study. All the legislation referred to comes from *Prachum kotmai pracham sok* [Collected Laws in Chronological Order], compiled by Sathian Laiyalak and others, and which, as the name suggests, reproduces all Siam/Thailand's laws since the beginning of the Bangkok era in 1782.⁴² A large number of Supreme Court (*san dika*) rulings on gambling cases have been drawn from the annual legal journal *Thammasan* that was published from 1917/18 onwards.⁴³ Lastly, the records of the meetings of the National Assembly, established following the 1932 coup, have also been employed.⁴⁴

These archival materials and official documents have been supplemented by the memoirs of prominent Thais, such as the noted scholar Phraya Anuman Rajadhon, and the accounts of Western visitors and residents in Siam.⁴⁵ One final important source is the English-language *Bangkok Times Weekly Mail*, a summary of the news from the six previous daily editions of the *Bangkok Times* that was distributed overseas. Both versions of the paper often carried translations of government announcements and of articles from the Thai-language press.

⁴² Sathian Laiyalak et al. (comps), *Prachum kotmai pracham sok* [Collected Laws in Chronological Order], Bangkok, 1935+, 69 vols. This study uses the abbreviation *PKPS*, as commonly used in other works, followed by the volume number when referencing a particular legislative act.

⁴³ *Thammasan*, Bangkok: Bamrung Nukunkit, 1917/18+.

⁴⁴ *Rai-ngan kanprachum sapha phuthaen ratsadon* [Records of the National Assembly], Bangkok: Office of the Parliamentary Secretary, 1933+.

⁴⁵ Sthirakoses (Phraya Anuman Rajdhon), *Looking Back: Book One*, Bangkok: Chulalongkorn University Press, 1992. Travelogues and memoirs by Westerners include Carl Bock, *Temples and Elephants: Travels in Siam in 1881-82*, Singapore: Oxford University Press, 1986 [1884]; and H. Warrington Smyth, *Five Years in Siam: From 1891-1896*, Bangkok: White Lotus, 1994 [1898], 2 vols.

1

Gambling, the Economy, and Siamese Society

This chapter will start by examining the socio-economic factors behind the spread of gambling within nineteenth century Siam, manifested by the expansion of the various gambling tax farms. After detailing some general features of this method of revenue collection, the three main types of gambling tax farms will be described. Gambling's role in Siamese society will then be assessed. It will conclude by considering both the expressed rationale and the underlying reasons for the restrictionist policy undertaken by Chulalongkorn's government in the last decades of the nineteenth century.

The Chinese and the Spread of Gambling in Siam

Dating back to the seventeenth century, Western visitors to Siam had long been quick to comment upon the prevalence of gambling within the kingdom, a trend that continued into the nineteenth century.¹ During the 1830s and 1840s, however, American missionaries, many of whom had resided in Siam for some time, discerned a substantial increase in the level of gambling. Dan Beach Bradley, for instance, noted that it 'is the reigning passion of the Chinese, and is rapidly enlisting the heart and soul of the Siamese.'² Such observations were usually accompanied by moralistic sermons on the pernicious effects of the 'vice'. Although these missionaries may have been inclined to exaggeration, there are other indications as to the spread of gambling within Siamese society during the nineteenth century. The most concrete

¹ Simon de La Loubère, *The Kingdom of Siam*, Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press, 1969 [1693], p. 50; Nicolas Gervaise, *The Natural and Political History of the Kingdom of Siam*, trans. & ed. John Villiers, Bangkok: White Lotus, 1998 [1688], p. 89; B. J. Terwiel, *Through Travellers' Eyes: An Approach to Early Nineteenth Century Thai History*, Bangkok: Editions Duang Kamol, 1989, pp. 214-15.

² *Bangkok Calendar*, 1871, p. 119. See also Terwiel, *Travellers' Eyes*, pp. 216-17.

manifestation of this was the growth in the number and types of tax farms responsible for the provision, management and taxation of gambling.

The Siamese state had employed tax farming as a method of revenue collection since the time of Ayutthaya. The first gambling house farms (*akon bonbia*) were established sometime between 1688 and 1756.³ Originally, this had little to do with generating state revenue; rather, it was designed to provide Chinese traders with a regulated outlet for gambling, while preventing the Siamese from taking part. This latter measure was unsuccessful, however, and separate gambling dens for the Chinese and the Siamese were created.⁴ Following the fall of Ayutthaya, the first two kings of the Chakri dynasty (Rama I 1782-1809 and Rama II 1809-24) re-established the gambling house farms. Chinese trade and labour were vital for the revival of the Siamese economy: letting them gamble as they did in China was a means of encouraging Chinese settlement.⁵

It was not until the reign of Rama III (1824-51), though, that tax farming was widely implemented. This was a result of the fundamental socio-economic changes the country was undergoing.⁶ The growth of the China trade during the early nineteenth century stimulated the production of cash crops – such as sugar cane, pepper and tobacco – for export and, in turn, gradually drew the Siamese cultivator into the market economy. By the mid-1820s, the level of economic activity in Siam was sufficient to support a large-scale system of internal revenue collection. The substantial increase in the number of gambling house farms and the creation of the *huai* lottery farm during the Third Reign were thus a reflection of a flourishing cash

³ Damrong, [Abolition], pp. 6-7.

⁴ Kanchana, [Government Policy], pp. 9-10; Damrong, [Abolition], pp. 8-9.

⁵ Kanchana, [Government Policy], p. 30.

⁶ The following discussion is drawn from Hong Lysa, *Thailand in the Nineteenth Century: Evolution of the Economy and Society*, Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 1984, Chs 3 & 4, esp. pp. 82-5; Kullada Kesboonchoo Mead, *The Rise and Decline of Thai Absolutism*, London: RoutledgeCurzon, 2004, Ch. 1, esp. pp. 20-3; Baker and Pasuk, *Thailand*, pp. 32-4, 42-4.

economy. Concurrently, there was a decline in the state's reliance upon, and ability to extract, forced labour. As a result of the expanding agrarian frontier and the increasing penetration of the cash economy, the general population was able to escape its *corvée* labour obligations, either through evasion or, later, the payment of a commutation tax. State labour requirements were to be increasingly met by immigrant Chinese wage labourers, who, driven by poverty and social disorder in China, began to arrive in greater numbers from the 1820s. This trend towards freer labour was encouraged by those elements of the Siamese elite that stood to gain from taxes on trade and the production of export crops. Consequently, the duration of people's labour obligations to the state was progressively reduced, and eventually abolished, over the course of the nineteenth century. These developments have an important bearing on the spread of gambling: indicating that the Siamese population had both the cash and the free time for gambling, while the growing Chinese population meant a greater market and demand for gambling facilities.

The decline of the China trade in the 1840s hastened this trend towards tax farming. During the reign of King Mongkut (1851-68), new tax farms were established on a range of other gambling activities. This period also saw a re-orientation of the economy towards the West. The Bowring Treaty, concluded with Britain in 1855, and the other so-called 'unequal' treaties subsequently signed with Western powers gave further impetus to the spread of gambling. The purpose of these treaties was to promote free trade: import duties were fixed at three percent and limits placed on export duties. Deprived of a key source of revenue, the finances of the Siamese state became increasingly dependent upon tax farming. The opening up of the economy, meanwhile, reinforced those socio-economic trends outlined above – the shift towards freer labour, increasing levels of Chinese immigration, the

monetisation of the economy – and, most significantly, acted as a spur for the widespread cultivation of rice for export. By the time Chulalongkorn came to the throne in 1868, tax farming had become the principal source of state revenue, and of all the various farms none were more lucrative than those controlling gambling. Indeed, revenue from these made up about one-fifth of the total revenue derived from tax farming.⁷

As should already be apparent, the expansion of the various gambling tax farms and the consequent spread of gambling within Siamese society were intimately linked with the growth of the immigrant Chinese population. Most obviously, all the games conducted within the gambling houses, along with the *huai* lottery, were of Chinese origin. While the Siamese state was prepared to let the Chinese play the former in order to encourage immigration, it took numerous precautions to prevent these games being taken up by the local population. But after initial prohibitions proved ineffective, the state created separate dens for the Chinese and the Siamese. This was a damage limitation exercise; Siamese dens were subject to stricter regulations so as to prevent addiction. For instance, cash had to be used at all times in Siamese dens, whereas Chinese ones were allowed to use counters as substitutes. Presumably, there were far fewer Siamese establishments. According to Kanchana, this separation was maintained in theory up until the early 1890s but in reality it proved impossible to enforce.⁸ That Siamese and Chinese gambled together is attested to by Carl Bock, who visited the country in the early 1880s.⁹ In short, by

⁷ In 1868, the total revenue from the various gambling tax farms was 599,400 baht. The total tax farming revenue was 2,874,236 baht. For a complete breakdown of the revenue from all the tax farms during the Fourth Reign see Constance M. Wilson, 'State and Society in the Reign of Mongkut, 1851-1868: Thailand on the Eve of Modernization', PhD dissertation, Cornell University, 1970, pp. 995-1000.

⁸ Kanchana, [Government Policy], pp. 11, 70-1.

⁹ Bock, *Temples and Elephants*, p. 43.

allowing the Chinese to gamble as they were accustomed to, the state inadvertently encouraged gambling amongst the Siamese.

Throughout the existence of the gambling houses and the *huai*, the Chinese apparently made up the majority of the customers. The tax farm for Chinese dens invariably cost more than its Siamese counterpart in the same region. Additionally, available evidence suggests that those in areas where there was a high concentration of Chinese – Bangkok, Songkhla and Ratchaburi for instance – commanded a higher price than those in other parts of the country.¹⁰ B. J. Terwiel argues that rather than correlating with the relative size of the total population, the price of a farm reflected the number of Chinese in that particular locale.¹¹ In 1916, Chaophraya Yomarat (Pan Sukhum), Minister of Local Government from 1907 to 1922 and then Minister of the Interior from 1922 to 1926, calculated that 75 percent of the gambling houses' clientele – except during Siamese festivals – was Chinese and that they also made up 50 percent of the *huai* lottery's custom.¹² Indeed, all the 'vice' tax farms – opium, gambling and alcohol – were based on Chinese consumption. This was all part of a sophisticated strategy to tax and control these highly transient labourers. Direct taxation on the Chinese, namely the triennial poll tax, was kept deliberately low and, along with the exemption from *corvée*, was designed to encourage Chinese immigration.¹³ The freedom to gamble was not merely just another inducement but a highly effective mechanism for the indirect taxation of the Chinese. William Skinner captures this exploitative aspect of the 'vice' tax farms when he states: 'while the country depended on the Chinese virtues for the expansion of commerce and industry,

¹⁰ For examples see Kanchana, [Government Policy], pp. 31, 48-9, 74-5.

¹¹ Terwiel, *Travellers' Eyes*, pp. 190-1.

¹² NA K Kh.0301.1.30/15, '[Comment on] H. E. Chao Phya Yomarat's letter of 1st March 2458 (1916) to H. M. the King on the Chinese Question'.

¹³ James C. Ingram, *Economic Change in Thailand, 1850-1970*, Stanford University Press, 1971, pp. 30-1.

the government relied on Chinese vices for the expansion of public revenue.’¹⁴ Moreover, many of these immigrants originally came to Siam with the hope of acquiring enough money to set themselves up back home. Encouraging gambling depleted their savings, prevented them returning and helped keep remittances to China low.¹⁵ Indeed, Yomarat was so convinced of this latter assertion that, on the eve of the abolition of the gambling tax farms, he urged that some dens be kept open exclusively for the Chinese.¹⁶

The exploitation of the Chinese gambling habit was most blatant in the southern tin-mining regions, such as Phuket. Until the twentieth century, the tin-mining industry was a virtual Chinese monopoly: the workforce consisted of Chinese labourers and the mine owners were invariably Chinese too. Along with the tin tax farm, these entrepreneurs commonly held the other major farms – on the import tax, opium, alcohol, and gambling – and were often appointed by Bangkok as the local provincial governors.¹⁷ The mines were organised around the *kongsi* system whereby the miners were provided with all their necessities on site: food, opium, liquor, and housing. But while their wages were relatively high, to compensate for the harsh conditions, they managed to save little. Indeed, the whole system was predicated on the mining magnate recouping as much of his workers’ wages as possible through their consumption habits. Miners were often advanced part of their wages; sometimes they might not be left with anything at all, having already blown it all on booze and gambling.¹⁸ In the 1890s, it was estimated that the government received 40 per cent

¹⁴ William G. Skinner, *Chinese Society in Thailand: An Analytical History*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1957, p. 120. See also Hong, *Thailand*, p. 127.

¹⁵ Skinner, *Chinese Society*, p. 125.

¹⁶ NA K Kh.0301.1.30/15, ‘Yomarat to Vajiravudh, 1 March 1916’.

¹⁷ For more details on this combination of entrepreneurial and administrative functions see Hong, *Thailand*, p. 92-3; Pasuk Phongpaichit and Chris Baker, *Thailand: Economy and Politics*, Oxford University Press, 1995, pp. 95-6.

¹⁸ Kanchana, [Government Policy], pp. 75-6.

of the earnings of all the miners in Phuket indirectly through these tax farms.¹⁹ Suehiro Akira even goes so far to suggest that this was the main reason Chinese capital was not active in introducing new technology into tin-mining for, although machinery would have saved on labour costs and raised productivity, it would also have reduced the manpower requirements and, consequently, the profits of gambling, liquor and opium dens attached to the *kongsi*.²⁰ A comparable situation existed in the Federated Malay States where the tax farms were often the only way of making the whole operation a viable endeavour for the mine owner. Additionally, Chinese capitalists used gambling to encourage indebtedness and thereby hold onto their workforce.²¹ To sum up, promoting gambling was a means of attracting Chinese labour, taxing it, and restricting its movements.

Just as they made up most of the gambling houses' and lottery's custom, the Chinese also dominated their management. Constance Wilson's detailed examination of taxation records from 1825 to 1891 show that the various gambling tax farms tended to be held by Chinese, only occasionally falling into Siamese hands.²² This dominance is usually attributed to the fact that only the Chinese had the financial resources, knowledge, and organisational capabilities to run these large farms.²³ Moreover, these Chinese entrepreneurs had close connections with the Siamese elite, ties cemented by intermarriage and joint business ventures; in essence, an alliance

¹⁹ Skinner, *Chinese Society*, p. 110.

²⁰ Suehiro Akira, *Capital Accumulation in Thailand, 1855-1985*, Chiang Mai: Silkworm, 1996, p. 69.

²¹ John G. Butcher, 'The Demise of the Revenue Farm System in the Federated Malay States', *Modern Asian Studies*, 17, 3 (1983), pp. 395-7.

²² Constance M. Wilson, 'Revenue Farming, Economic Development and Government Policy during the Early Bangkok Period, 1830-92' in John Butcher and Howard Dick (eds), *The Rise and Fall of Revenue Farming: Business Elites and the Emergence of the Modern State in Southeast Asia*, London: MacMillan, 1993, p. 148. Kanchana estimates that 90 percent of the gambling tax farmers were Chinese, [Government Policy], p. 101.

²³ Kanchana, [Government Policy], pp. 19, 101. This was a feature of tax farming throughout South East Asia, see John Butcher, 'Revenue Farming and the Changing State in Southeast Asia' in John Butcher and Howard Dick (eds), *The Rise and Fall of Revenue Farming: Business Elites and the Emergence of the Modern State in Southeast Asia*, London: MacMillan, 1993, p. 24.

between Chinese economic power and Siamese political authority. However, conventional explanations as to the reasons for the later termination of tax farming portray it as an attempt to limit the insidious effects of Chinese influence. This is the line taken by Kanchana in her study of the abolition of the gambling house and lottery tax farms.²⁴

There are two elements to this argument. First, while gambling may have helped limit the remittances of Chinese labourers, the super-profits from the gambling farms enabled the Chinese plutocrats that controlled them to remit even greater sums. This was a serious impediment to economic development, causing a fall in the amount of cash in circulation and preventing capital accumulation for investment in the kingdom.²⁵ However, there are only the sketchiest of estimates as to the total sums that might have been remitted: Yomarat placed it at 30 million baht in 1916, while the Financial Adviser, Walter Williamson, cited a figure of 26 million for 1912. The latter sought to downplay the significance of remittances by arguing that they amounted to only a fraction of Chinese earnings, the greater part of which were spent in the country. Furthermore, the problem was by no means unique to Siam.²⁶ On the other hand, a fierce proponent of the view that the gambling farms fuelled remittances was F. H. Giles, head of the Provincial Revenue Department and the man charged with finding alternative means of raising revenue. Based on the actual prices of the gambling houses and lottery farms, he estimated that the total profits amounted to one

²⁴ Kanchana, [Government Policy], p. 207.

²⁵ Ibid., pp. 101-2, 173-4; Ingram, *Economic Change*, p. 204.

²⁶ NA K Kh.0301.1.30/15, '[Comment on] H. E. Chao Phya Yomarat's letter of 1st March 2458 (1916) to H. M. the King on the Chinese Question'. Other scholars have since questioned their significance, see Kenneth P. Landon, *The Chinese in Thailand*, New York: Russell & Russell, 1941, pp. 43-5; Ian Brown, 'The End of the Opium Farm in Siam, 1905-7' in John Butcher and Howard Dick (eds), *The Rise and Fall of Revenue Farming: Business Elites and the Emergence of the Modern State in Southeast Asia*, London: MacMillan, 1993, p. 243.

and a half million baht a year, of which he believed the major portion was remitted.²⁷ Thus, while the actual amount and significance of remittances may be difficult to determine, the conviction that they were a drain on the economy was held by elements in the Siamese administration.

The second aspect is that the Chinese plutocrats threatened to turn their economic might into political power.²⁸ During the nineteenth century, they had been dependent upon royal and aristocratic patronage to secure the tax farms. From the 1870s, though, the super-profits from these enterprises enabled them to diversify into other areas such as sugar processing, rice-milling, ferryboats, and banking.²⁹ Additionally, these tax farmers had strong associations with the Chinese secret societies.³⁰ This made the Chinese plutocrats less dependent upon the Siamese elite, whose political authority they might now challenge. By the reign of King Vajiravudh, the court had grown alarmed at how events in China, leading to the republican overthrow of the Manchu dynasty in 1911, had politicised the Bangkok Chinese community and fuelled a nascent Chinese nationalism. To counter these threats, Vajiravudh launched an ideological assault that sought to exclude the Chinese from the life of the Siamese nation by portraying them as immoral, exploitative aliens: the 'Jews of the East'. The increasingly strict regulation of the gambling house and lottery tax farms, which culminated in their abolition in the mid-1910s, is thus depicted as part of this assault on the Chinese secret societies and Chinese wealth.³¹ But while this argument might illuminate some of the short-term factors, it does not

²⁷ NA R.5 Kh.14.1.Kh/18, 'Memorandum containing proposals as to the manner in which revenue can be raised to supply the deficiency which will be caused by the abolition of gambling in the provinces, F. H. Giles, 7 Jan. 1905'.

²⁸ Kanchana, [Government Policy], pp. 113-14.

²⁹ Ibid., p. 173; Pasuk and Baker, *Thailand*, p. 96. For an account of the career of a Chinese entrepreneur that made this transition see Hong, *Thailand*, p. 154.

³⁰ Skinner, *Chinese Society*, p. 140; Hong, *Thailand*, p. 103.

³¹ Kanchana, [Government Policy], pp. 157-9. See also Butcher, 'Revenue Farming', p. 36; and Skinner, *Chinese Society*, p. 166.

explain why the Siamese state should commit itself to the restriction of gambling from the late 1880s. In his study of the end of the main opium farm in 1907, Ian Brown highlights how the kingdom's Chinese entrepreneurs had other sources of capital accumulation, having already diversified into more profitable and secure business enterprises. Abolishing the tax farms, therefore, was not guaranteed to reduce Chinese economic influence. Moreover, Brown asserts that in the first decade of the twentieth century the Siamese elite was dependent upon Chinese capital for its own business ambitions and thus an attack upon the Chinese was not in its interests.³²

What is clear, though, is that the Siamese elite blamed the Chinese for the prevalence of gambling within the kingdom. Assessing the causes of debt slavery, Prince Dilok Nabarath, one of Chulalongkorn's many sons, attributed it in part to 'an age-old passionate gambling compulsion which has spread very widely these last years, i.e. since the immigration of numerous Chinese to Siam.'³³ Vajiravudh, meanwhile, went further: gambling was 'a disease embedded deep in the blood of the Chinese' (*kanlenphanan pen rok khao luak chin titluk*).³⁴ The implication is that something had to be done to prevent this 'disease' from infecting the Siamese. Government attempts to restrict gambling were thus a reflection of deep-seated anti-Chinese sentiment, a feeling not limited to the Siamese elite. Terwiel suggests that an 1848 pogrom in Chachoengsao against local Chinese indicated 'a smouldering resentment' that stemmed not only from their success in business but also 'the fact that in their wake had come gambling halls, distilleries, and... some prostitution'.³⁵ In short, the Chinese community in Siam was strongly associated with mounting social problems. These Chinese-related themes will be teased out in Chapter 2.

³² Brown, 'End of the Opium Farm', pp. 243-4.

³³ Prince Dilok Nabarath, *Siam's Rural Economy under King Chulalongkorn*, trans. Walter E. J. Tips, Bangkok: White Lotus, 2000 [1908], p. 36.

³⁴ NA R.6 N.4.1/9, 'Vajiravudh to Yomarat, 13 June 1916'.

³⁵ Terwiel, *Travellers' Eyes*, p. 175.

The Gambling Tax Farms

Tax farming was essentially a compromise on the part of the state. It delegated its powers of tax collection on a range of products and services to private operators in exchange for a certain fixed rent, which in theory was greater than that which the state could collect on its own. The allocation of tax farms was determined by auction, with the monopoly rights going to the highest bidder. For their part, tax farmers were granted certain powers and privileges to help them run their monopolies and meet their obligations. Crucially, they got to keep all the income over and above what they had promised to the state. The attractions of tax farming for the Siamese state of the early nineteenth century are obvious: it entailed little expenditure on its part but provided a certain level of income.³⁶ It was up to the tax farmers to ensure they ran an efficient and profitable collection system.³⁷ Moreover, Hong Lysa argues that: 'The automatic escalation of state revenue in proportion to the profitability of the farm was the cornerstone of the dynamics of the tax farming system.'³⁸ This was the theory, at least. But there was an inherent contradiction in the system; although employed as an agent of the state, the tax farmer was a private entrepreneur and, as will be discussed later, the interests of the two did not always coincide.³⁹

For now, the importance of tax farming to the Siamese state should be emphasised. Indeed, by the mid-nineteenth century the state had become dependent on tax farming for the greater part of its revenue. This was due to the restrictions on custom duties and land taxes imposed by the 'unequal' treaties that had deprived the state of alternative sources of income. At the same time, the state lacked the administrative apparatus and the knowledge to collect taxes on its own. Tax farming

³⁶ Kanchana, [Government Policy], pp. 24, 81.

³⁷ Hong, *Thailand*, pp. 90-1.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 93.

³⁹ Butcher, 'Revenue Farming', pp. 19, 37.

thus provided a relatively stable source of income at a critical period in the formation of the modern Thai state; funding Chulalongkorn's celebrated administrative reforms, which laid the foundations of absolutism and safeguarded Siam from the colonial threat.⁴⁰ As Damrong recognised, the particular beauty of the various gambling tax farms was that they were the most effective means of extracting revenue from the population without provoking discontent; people gambled out of their own free will and, should they lose everything, they were likely to blame themselves or misfortune rather than the gambling houses or the *huai* lottery.⁴¹ In short, the gambling tax farms were essential to the state.

The various gambling tax farms covered three distinct areas: the running of public gambling houses, where Chinese games were played; the operation of the *huai* lottery, also of Chinese origin; and, lastly, the supervision of gambling on a variety of activities, including traditional Siamese pastimes such as cockfighting and boat-racing, and numerous card and board games. A single tax farm might often combine all these different functions. For example, the *huai* lottery was part of one of the gambling house farms for Bangkok until Chulalongkorn separated them in 1872 so as to increase the revenue.⁴² Conversely, the tax farms for other forms of gambling had been merged with those for the gambling houses by 1891 at the latest.⁴³ Even when separate, the same tax farmer might have held both monopolies.⁴⁴ Geographically, Bangkok-established tax farms covered all the major towns as far north as Uttaradit, to Nakhon Ratchasima in the east, and to Songkhla in the south. Bangkok's tributaries and dependencies – Chiang Mai, the Malay sultanates, and the outer provinces of the

⁴⁰ This point is made by various scholars, see for instance Wilson, 'Revenue Farming', p. 161.

⁴¹ Damrong, [Abolition], p. 90.

⁴² Wilson, 'Revenue Farming', p. 153; Kullada, *Rise and Decline*, p. 52.

⁴³ *PKPS*, 13, p. 53.

⁴⁴ Wilson, 'State and Society', pp. 635, 1045-6.

Northeast – had their own tax farms.⁴⁵ Following the extension of Bangkok's control in the 1880s, local political leaders were stripped of their power to appoint tax farmers and local gambling farms were abolished.⁴⁶

Before considering these different gambling activities and their management separately, it is worthwhile outlining some general features of the tax farming system. Throughout the nineteenth century, the system was increasingly regulated in order to maximise the revenue accruing to the state; the following discussion of the bidding and payment process details the system as it existed before closure of the gambling houses started in the 1880s. In 1873, Chulalongkorn established the Finance Office (*Ho Ratsadakonphiphat*) to supervise all the tax farms, for previously they had been under the control of separate ministries and departments. The Finance Office held this role until 1892 when the Ministry of Finance took over.⁴⁷ Both the auctioning system and the procedure for tax farmers to make their payments to the government were revised on each of these occasions.⁴⁸ The tax farmers held their monopoly for a fixed term; this was originally three years but at some point in the latter part of the nineteenth century was changed to one year.⁴⁹ At the end of this term, the holder could, of course, bid to retain the farm. The auction of a farm was announced one month in advance and prospective farmers invited to make proposals. On the day of the auction, the highest was announced and those assembled could then make further bids, with the monopoly going to the highest bidder. To ensure that the state received the money due, the new tax farmer had to have a guarantor and pay a deposit of three

⁴⁵ See the map and related comments in Wilson, 'Revenue Farming', pp. 150-1.

⁴⁶ Kanchana, [Government Policy], pp. 76-7. The Chiang Mai gambling farm was abolished by Bangkok's Special Commissioner in November 1884.

⁴⁷ On the establishment of the Finance Office see Hong, *Thailand*, pp. 116-19; Kullada, *Rise and Decline*, pp. 52-4.

⁴⁸ For a breakdown of these reforms see Kanchana, [Government Policy], pp. 58-60, 125.

⁴⁹ It is unclear exactly when this change was implemented, though Damrong indicates it was before the first gambling houses were closed in 1887. Damrong, [Abolition], p. 19. See also Wilson, 'Revenue Farming', p. 151.

monthly instalments in advance. The rest of the bid was paid in monthly instalments. At the end of their term, the incumbent could continue to hold the farm, provided they had not fallen into debt and there were no others who wished to take it on.⁵⁰

All tax farmers were given an official title with a minimum of 400 *sakdina* marks, making them lesser nobility, and a range of special powers to help facilitate their operations.⁵¹ Indicating the importance of gambling revenue to the state, gambling house and lottery farmers were sometimes granted as many as 800 *sakdina* marks.⁵² Amongst other privileges, they had the right to arrest any illegal gamblers within their jurisdiction and then receive any fines incurred once the case had been tried.⁵³ Some had their own jails where debtors could be confined in chains until their debt was cleared.⁵⁴ Moreover, to enforce and protect their monopolies, these tax farmers employed their own networks of spies and private armies of toughs. As Howard Dick observes of tax farming in general, 'the state delegated not only the collection of taxes but also its powers of coercion'.⁵⁵ Clearly, gambling tax farmers enjoyed a high level of autonomy; their farm was essentially their personal fiefdom to administer as they wished, an *imperium in imperio*.⁵⁶ While this power may have been necessary for the farm to run effectively, it also gave the tax farmer the opportunity to abuse his position for personal gain to the detriment of the Siamese state and population.

⁵⁰ Hong, *Thailand*, pp. 116-17; Damrong, [Abolition], pp. 19-20.

⁵¹ *Sakdina* literally means 'power over the fields' and the number of marks indicated one's position in the official hierarchy. See Hong, *Thailand*, p. 6.

⁵² Kanchana, [Government Policy], p. 66.

⁵³ Damrong, [Abolition], p. 21.

⁵⁴ Holt Samuel Hallett, *A Thousand Miles on an Elephant in the Shan States*, London & Edinburgh: William Blackwood & Sons, 1890, p. 243.

⁵⁵ Howard Dick, 'A Fresh Approach to Southeast Asian History' in John Butcher and Howard Dick (eds), *The Rise and Fall of Revenue Farming: Business Elites and the Emergence of the Modern State in Southeast Asia*, London: MacMillan, 1993, pp. 5-6.

⁵⁶ Butcher, 'Revenue Farming', p. 37.

With regards to the gambling farms in the Federated Malay States, John Butcher highlights how colonial officials justified their existence on the grounds that they were the 'best possible means of restricting gambling' because 'it was in the farmer's interests to prevent any gambling taking place except with his permission, the implication being that he would seldom if ever allow gambling except in the known gambling houses since this would undermine his profits.'⁵⁷ It is possible to discern a similar logic to the gambling farms in Siam but, in both cases, the reality was rather different. Gambling farmers were only too willing to tolerate illicit gambling so long as they received a cut of the profits, and they even ran prohibited games themselves.⁵⁸ Sometimes people conspired with the gambling farmer to set up an illegal game: once many people had gathered, the farmer would turn up to arrest them. The organiser and the farmer would then split the money the latter received in fines.⁵⁹

Although in theory the revenue from tax farming should have provided the state with a guaranteed level of income that steadily rose, this was not always the case. There were two principal reasons for this: first, the inability or unwillingness of tax farmers to pay the full auction price of their monopoly, and second, the domination of tax farms by certain individuals and syndicates. With regards to the first, it was only natural that the tax farmer should try to maximise his income while minimising the amount that he paid to the state. Citing problems such as a decline in custom because of a bad harvest, the unwelcome attentions of rival Chinese secret societies or the failure of subcontractors to make their payments, gambling tax farmers would either ask for a reduction in the sum of each monthly instalment or just

⁵⁷ Butcher, 'Demise', p. 393.

⁵⁸ Ibid.; Kanchana, [Government Policy], p. 83.

⁵⁹ *PKPS*, 8, p. 135.

go into debt to the government.⁶⁰ Since they often held the monopoly for more than one province or more than one of the different farms, they usually sublet their monopoly rights. Kanchana gives an example of a gambling house farmer who had held his monopoly for many years and by 1891/2 was over 1,200 chang (9,600 baht) in debt. When the Ministry of Finance finally demanded payment, he sent back a list of all his subcontractors who had failed to pay him and transferred their debts to him to the government.⁶¹ This problem of incomplete payment was intensified by the fierce competition involved in securing a farm. Overestimating the potential profits or just being determined to beat all other competitors might lead a prospective farmer to submit a bid he could not possibly honour.⁶² When a farmer asked for a reduction in the monopoly price or merely fell behind in his payments, the Finance Office might decide to put the farm up for re-auction. However, the value of the farm would be significantly reduced, especially if the farmer had defaulted because of external problems. In some cases there might be no others willing, or able, to place a bid and the original farmer would end up retaining his farm at a reduced price while still being in debt to the state.⁶³ As Kanchana highlights when the gambling farmers profited from their operations they rarely raised their bids for the following year but as soon as they were in danger of making a loss they were quick to ask the government to help share the responsibility.⁶⁴

More seriously, the monopolisation of tax farms by syndicates undermined the very basis of the system, namely that state revenue would increase in proportion to the profitability of the farms. As Hong emphasises, however, this was dependent on the free play of market forces, a prerequisite that was in short supply by the end of the

⁶⁰ Kanchana, [Government Policy], pp. 81, 95.

⁶¹ Ibid., pp. 94-5. See also Hong, *Thailand*, p. 103.

⁶² Hong, *Thailand*, p. 103.

⁶³ Kanchana, [Government Policy], pp. 96-7.

⁶⁴ Ibid., p. 98.

Fourth Reign.⁶⁵ With the backing of Chinese secret societies, provincial authorities or a powerful patron within the court, tax farmers were able to subvert the bidding process and retain their monopoly at the original price for many years. Intimidation might also be used to ensure there were no rival bids.⁶⁶ Syndicates were formed in which control of the gambling farms was rotated amongst members, with the bidding price stagnating or even falling.⁶⁷ This problem was compounded by a shortage of potential tax farmers with the capital and organisational capabilities to run the gambling and lottery farms. Unlike tax farms that were based on people's production, these two required large amounts of capital to cover operational costs and losses. Running the *huai* was a particularly complex operation requiring a large staff.⁶⁸ A limited pool of competitors meant the state had to rely on certain individuals they might not otherwise have chosen. As Chapter 2 will show, this shortage grew acute in the early twentieth century. In short, although tax farming provided the state with a fairly reliable and regular source of income, the machinations of the tax farmers ensured that the system never worked to its full potential or, towards the end, worked at all. Revenue was always being drained away from the state into the pockets of the tax farmers.

For much of the nineteenth century, this was a price the Siamese state was willing to pay. Indeed, while it lacked the resources to collect taxes for itself, it remained dependent on the tax farmers. This dependence was exacerbated by the restrictions on custom duties imposed by the 'unequal' treaties of the 1850s, denying the state alternative revenue sources. All the state could do to correct the imbalance was try to regulate the system more strictly. Unsurprisingly, this was one of

⁶⁵ Hong, *Thailand*, pp. 93, 103.

⁶⁶ Kanchana, [Government Policy], p. 68.

⁶⁷ Ibid., p. 83; Wilson, 'State and Society', pp. 635-6.

⁶⁸ Kanchana, [Government Policy], p. 99.

Chulalongkorn's priorities during the first two decades of his reign.⁶⁹ As Chapter 2 will illustrate, the gradual closure of the gambling houses was part of this rationalisation strategy. The irony is, of course, that tax farming, in Siam just as elsewhere in South East Asia, 'sowed the seeds of its own destruction.'⁷⁰ It provided Chulalongkorn with the funds to create a strong centralised state with a bureaucracy that could collect its own taxes, thereby rendering itself obsolete. However, the abolition of the gambling farms was not just about dismantling the last vestiges of an archaic system. There were strong objections to gambling in itself.

The Gambling Houses

The gambling houses or dens, in Thai *bonbia*, were places where a specific form of Chinese gambling took place. The holder of the farm enjoyed the total monopoly on the operation of such establishments within his district. Moreover, no one could play these particular games elsewhere without his permission. Until tighter regulations were imposed on the gambling farms in the late 1880s, he could open as many dens as he desired but, naturally, establishing too many would have undermined his profits. Rather than build new dens every time the ownership of the farm changed, the incoming farmer would 'inherit' those of his predecessor. These were either staffed with the farmer's own personnel or, more commonly, sublet out to another, who might then manage that den for many years.⁷¹

Evocative descriptions of the gambling houses abound. Indeed, for the contemporary Westerner, it seems that no trip to Bangkok was complete without a

⁶⁹ For a description of the fiscal reforms see Hong, *Thailand*, pp. 116-19; Kullada, *Rise and Decline*, pp. 52-4.

⁷⁰ Dick, 'Fresh Approach', p. 9. See also Hong, *Thailand*, pp. 130-1.

⁷¹ Damrong, [Abolition], pp. 19-21.

visit to such an establishment.⁷² A number of Siamese also recorded their impressions of the dens for posterity.⁷³ Prior to the 1890s, gambling houses were located wherever large numbers of people tended to congregate, especially around markets and piers. Most were extremely basic in design, little more than large bamboo sheds with roofs of nipa-palm leaves and earthen floors. If near a waterway or river, a houseboat would be used. One Westerner in 1870s Bangkok claimed: 'you can scarcely go in any direction five minutes without coming to a gambling shed or gambling floating house.'⁷⁴ This was no exaggeration; in 1887, there were officially over 400 dens in the capital, 126 of which were described as large.⁷⁵ As for the provinces, Hallett claimed that gambling houses could be found in every village.⁷⁶ It is difficult to pinpoint an exact figure, though, because the only statistics are for the number of provincial dens closed between 1898 and 1906, and in some areas no figure was given. One secondary source places the number of provincial establishments at 210 in 1887/8, while Kanchana estimates that there were up to 243 by 1898.⁷⁷ The 1898 announcement of closures suggests these were concentrated in the Central Plain, with the amount in any given *monthon* (an administrative area composed of several

⁷² See for instance Carl Bock, *Temples and Elephants*, pp. 43, 46; Hallett, *Thousand Miles*, pp. 234-5; Charles Burs, *Siamese Sketches*, trans. Walter E. J. Tips, Bangkok: White Lotus, 1994 [1901], pp. 36-7; Prince Wilhelm of Sweden, 'Extract from *In the Lands of the Sun*' in *Foreign Records of the Bangkok Period up to AD 1932: Published on the Occasion of the Rattanakosin Bicentennial*, 1982, Bangkok, 1982, p. 218-19.

⁷³ By far the most detailed is Sthirakoses, *Looking Back*, pp. 134-9, 143-8. See also Phraya Anuphap Traiphop, *Phramahanakhonkrungthep nai khwamsongcham khun ayu chetsip* [Bangkok as Remembered by a Seventy-Year Old], Bangkok: Cremation Volume, 1961, pp. 147-50.

⁷⁴ *Bangkok Calendar*, 1873, p. 65.

⁷⁵ *PKPS*, 11, p. 127.

⁷⁶ Hallett, *Thousand Miles*, p. 234.

⁷⁷ Chumphon Lohachala, 'Khambanyai ruang kanphanan chanit tang-tang ti khun-su san [Descriptions of various forms of gambling that come up in court]' in *Anuson nai ngan phraratchathan phloengsop phontamruattri suwit sothithat* [Cremation Volume for Police Major General Suwit Sothithat], Bangkok: Samphan, 1981, p. 3; Kanchana [Gambling Taxes], pp. 75, 145-6.

provinces) diminishing the further from Bangkok.⁷⁸ Most large provincial towns had at least one den.

Three games were commonly played in the gambling houses: *thua*, also called *thua yai*; *po pan*; and *po kam*.⁷⁹ They were known collectively as *thua po* and, discarding cheating, were games of pure chance. Placing a bet was conducted on the same principle for all three games, and each was played on one of the many mats that covered the floors of the dens. They differed only in the equipment used. Each mat was divided into four quarters by a large cross, like the letter X. The four openings, or 'gates' (*pratu*), formed by the cross were the points on which to bet. The opening directly in front of the dealer represented the number four and was called *khrop*, meaning 'complete'. Going clockwise from the dealer in ascending order were the numbers one to three. This arrangement was well known and there was no need for the gates to be marked.

There were various ways of placing a bet and the winner would receive between one and three times their stake, depending on the odds of winning, losing or 'drawing'. These variants were designed to keep players interested. *O* was the most straightforward method: if the gambler's number came up, they won three times their stake. Other methods were a little more complex since there was the added possibility of neither winning nor losing, in Thai gambling parlance: *chao*. For instance, if *meng* was used, the player would receive only the amount of their stake if correct.

⁷⁸ For instance, pre-1898 there were 71 dens in monthon Ayutthaya compared with 11 in monthon Nakhon Ratchasima. *PKPS*, 16, pp. 288-91.

⁷⁹ The following descriptions of these games and the methods of betting are drawn from a variety of sources. The most authoritative are Damrong, [Abolition], pp. 27-9; Chumphon, [Descriptions], pp. 17-21; Phakdi Sirisuwan, *Khambanyai wichakansopsuan kanphanan* [Explanations of Gambling], Bangkok, 1953, pp. 3-8; Lisut Thonchai, *Khu-mu kanphanan* [Gambling Handbook], 2nd ed., Bangkok, nd, pp. 93-9; Khun Wichit Matra, *80 pi nai chiwit khapphachao* [80 Years in My Life], Bangkok, 1980, pp. 104-5. The best English-language descriptions are in Sthirakoses, *Looking Back*, pp. 134-9; *Siam Repository*, 1873, pp. 88-9, which refers to *thua* as the 'mat game' and *po pan* as the 'brass-cup game'; and Adolf Bastian, *A Journey in Siam (1863)*, trans. Walter E. J. Tips and ed. Christian Goodden, Bangkok: White Lotus, 2005 [1868], pp. 262-3.

However, should one of the adjacent numbers come up, then they would neither win nor lose. In short, players had the same chance, one in four, of winning or losing.

Thua, a variant of fan-tan, was the game on which the big money was won and lost. Any number could play but there was a minimum stake.⁸⁰ Most gambling houses ran only one *thua* circle and the large circular mat, some 20 to 30 feet in diameter, on which it was played formed the focal point of the establishment.⁸¹ The dealer would take between 100 and 200 cowrie shells and heap them in a pile in front of him. He would then count out the cowries in sets of four. The remainder was the winning number; if the final set was complete, *khrop*, then four was the winner. *Po kam* was conducted on exactly the same lines, though the cowries were smaller and a lesser amount used. There would be as many circles as demand warranted. Unsurprisingly, there was some cheating. W. A. R. Wood, a former British consul in Siam, implies that the dealers were adept at secreting cowries so that the result would be the most amenable for the house.⁸²

Po pan was played with a cube, each side of which was half red and half white. Before play, the dealer and the players would agree which of the colours was the winner; they usually chose white. The dealer would place this cube in a brass rectangular box consisting of two parts, the larger of which slid over the other to conceal the cube (see Figure 1.1). The brass box was placed in the centre of the cross on the mat and then spun by the dealer. After all bets had been placed, the dealer removed the outer box to reveal the top face of the cube. The winning number was that opposite the agreed colour.

⁸⁰ Damrong asserts that the minimum stake was one salung (quarter of a baht), while Wichit places it at two salung and Anuman at one baht. Damrong, [Abolition], p. 27; Wichit, [80 Years], p. 105; Sthirakoses, *Looking Back*, p. 139.

⁸¹ Arnold Wright and Oliver Breakspear (eds), *Twentieth Century Impressions of Siam: Its History, People, Commerce, Industries and Resources*, Bangkok: White Lotus, 1994 [1908], p. 248.

⁸² W. A. R. Wood, *Consul in Paradise: Sixty-Nine Years in Siam*, London: Souvenir Press, 1965, p. 21.

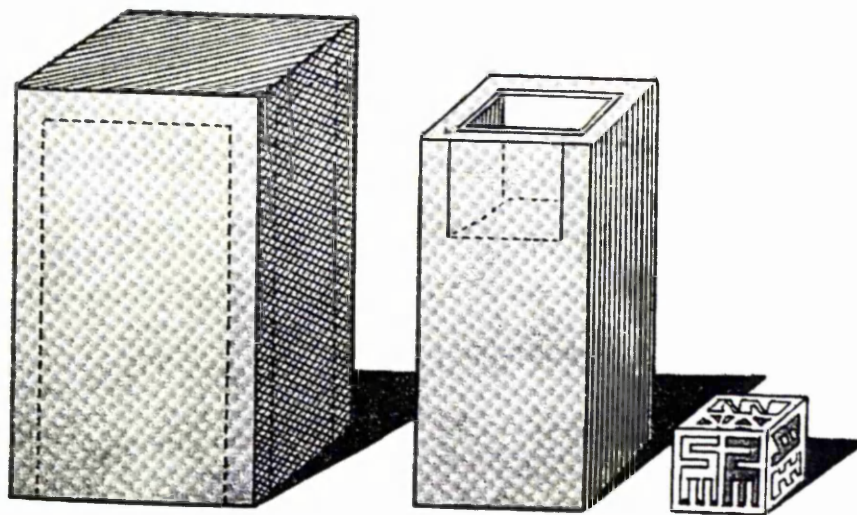


Figure 1.1: Equipment for playing *po pan* (Source: Phakdi, *Khambanyai*)

Gambling was not the only attraction. Theatrical and musical performances – Chinese operas (*ngiu*), Thai classical dramas (*lakhon*), folk comedies (*li-ke*), and shadow-puppet shows – were staged in order to entice people inside.⁸³ Indeed, along with the lottery hall, the gambling houses were the entertainment hotspots of their day. Recalling his childhood, Phraya Anuman Rajadhon noted how ‘the night life then was mainly centred around the lottery and the cowries houses, which were fully illuminated in contrast to the dark found in the rest of the city.’⁸⁴ As already mentioned, the clientele was predominantly Chinese, the majority of whom were male.⁸⁵ Siamese men and women, young and old could also be found therein. *Thua* was played by the well-off, while *po kam* and *po pan* were played by those with little cash to spare. The amounts staked varied enormously: from the lowest currency denominations such as one *phai* (1/32 of a baht) or one *at* (1/64 of a baht) on the

⁸³ Damrong, [Abolition], p. 29; Sthirakoses, *Looking Back*, p. 148; Hallett, *Thousand Miles*, p. 235.

⁸⁴ Sthirakoses, *Looking Back*, p. 161.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 146.

latter two games to thousands of baht on the former.⁸⁶ A permanent feature was a jobless underclass of young men: beggars, opium addicts, thieves, and toughs, collectively known as the ‘ghosts of the gambling houses’ (*kia-kui* or *phuak kui*, a term of Chinese origin).⁸⁷ The dens gave them plentiful opportunities for crime: picking the pockets of a gambler absorbed in the game or jumping some unlucky winner on their way home and relieving them of their winnings.⁸⁸ This environment was also a breeding ground for recruits into bandit gangs, whose ill-gotten gains would invariably be blown on gambling, opium and liquor.⁸⁹ In short, a criminal underworld revolved around the gambling houses.

Within the immediate vicinity of the gambling houses there were various ‘support industries’: liquor stalls, opium dens and pawnshops. Indeed, gambling houses and pawnshops had an almost symbiotic relationship. Players down on their luck would pawn their jewellery, ornaments, furniture, and even their clothes, before returning to gamble once more.⁹⁰ Moreover, pawnshops commonly received stolen property, enabling thieves to easily acquire funds for gambling.⁹¹ The depth of this relationship is illustrated by the impact of the 1901 Pawnbrokers Act, which required all pawnshops to be licensed, all forfeited pledges to be examined by the police before sale, and the owner to report any items that appeared on a list of stolen

⁸⁶ Sthirakoses, *Looking Back*, p. 139; Wichit, [80 Years], p. 105; Wright and Breakspear (eds), *Twentieth Century Impressions*, p. 248.

⁸⁷ Sthirakoses, *Looking Back*, p. 147.

⁸⁸ For more examples see Walter E. J. Tips, *Crime and Punishment in King Chulalongkorn's Kingdom*, Bangkok: White Lotus, 1998, pp. 113-15, 166-7.

⁸⁹ Prince Damrong Rachanuphap, *Ruang sonthana kap phuraiploon* [Interview with a Bandit], Bangkok: Cremation Volume, 1925, pp. 5-6, 41-2; Tips, *Crime and Punishment*, pp. 85-9, 103-6, 132-6, 276.

⁹⁰ Anuphap, [Bangkok], p. 150; Ernest Young, *The Kingdom of the Yellow Robe*, London: Archibald Constable & Co., 1900, p. 18; Hermann Norden, *From Golden Gate to Golden Sun: A Record of Travel, Sport, and Observation in Siam and Malaya*, London: H. F. and G. Witherby, 1923, pp. 131-2.

⁹¹ *RFAB 1901-02*, p. 3; Warrington Smyth, *Five Years in Siam*, vol. II, p. 255-6. For example court cases in which stolen property was pawned see Tips, *Crime and Punishment*, pp. 56-7, 62-5, 103-6, 141-2.

property published daily by the Police Special Branch.⁹² Its immediate effect was the closure of all 432 pawnshops in Bangkok as the proprietors initially refused to comply with the regulations. The profits of the gambling house and opium farmers were hit so severely that they agitated, unsuccessfully, for the law to be repealed. As for the consequent reduction in crime, Eric St. John Lawson, Acting Commissioner of Police, observed that:

The very large body of snatch thieves found themselves in the awful predicament of either having to do some work or else give up gambling and opium. They chose the lesser of two evils and a large number of coolies appeared, as if by magic, and the novel sight of Siamese coolies working in the streets was seen.⁹³

With their profits down, the gambling houses then started to receive stolen property and other goods in pawn; some den managers even ended up being convicted under the Pawnbrokers Act.⁹⁴ When licensed pawnshops opened later that year, crime returned to more regular levels but the pawnshops now acted as instruments of detection. Clearly, the gambling houses and pawnshops were interdependent. Indeed, it is revealing that when restrictions were imposed on the locations of both establishments at the end of the nineteenth century, the government did not physically separate them.⁹⁵ Presumably, such a move would have impacted too heavily on their profitability and, in turn, state revenue.

The combination of alcohol, opium, gambling and pawnshops created a locus of criminality. But this was not merely limited to theft and robbery. The ready availability of alcohol combined with frustration at gaming losses and the practice of going around armed created a highly volatile atmosphere. Arguments over some

⁹² Cecil A. Carter, *The Kingdom of Siam*, New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1904, p. 124; Wright and Breakspear (eds), *Twentieth Century Impressions*, p. 108.

⁹³ *RPAB* 120 [1901/02], p. 22.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*

⁹⁵ Kanchana, [Government Policy], p. 180-1.

perceived slight or allegations of cheating sometimes ended in murder.⁹⁶ Indeed, A. J. A. Jardine, the Inspector General of Police for Bangkok from June 1897 to March 1902, attributed the frequency of murders in the capital to five principal causes, of which gambling was one.⁹⁷ His successor, Lawson, also found the number of murders high – 113 for the year 1903/4, excluding those committed by bandits – and commented that: ‘The young bloods go to gamble, get drunk, quarrel amongst themselves and then someone is murdered. Nearly all the cases occur like this.’⁹⁸ He then expounded on the connection between opium, alcohol, gambling and crime at some length:

Drinking, like opium eating and smoking, is getting worse and worse every year. A large percentage of the drunkards either murder someone or get murdered. The majority of the opium smokers and eaters become robbers and thieves. The original main cause, however, is the gambling house. The gambler nearly always drinks or smokes opium. How much these three vices depend on each other is clearly shewn by the fact that when the gambling houses at Pacret, Nontaburi and Paklat were closed on April 1st, nearly all the drinking shops and opium shops at those places closed up because there was not enough business to be done.⁹⁹

The British officers that headed the Bangkok police force around the turn of the twentieth century clearly believed that the gambling houses were a prime cause of crime.¹⁰⁰ In his 1903/4 report, Lawson drew a revealing comparison of serious crime in Bombay, Calcutta, Rangoon and Bangkok:

Bombay and Calcutta are larger than Bangkok, Rangoon much smaller. All four towns are otherwise very similar. All four are ports with a mixed and constantly changing population. It is therefore rather startling to find that in

⁹⁶ Tips, *Crime and Punishment*, pp. 109-10; Kanchana, [Government Policy], pp. 86-7.

⁹⁷ The other causes, in no apparent order, were the Chinese secret societies, jealousy and quarrels about women, insufficient restrictions on the carrying of arms, and, lastly, the drinking and opium dens. *RPAB 1898-99*, pp. 40-1.

⁹⁸ *RPAB Year 123* [1903/4], pp. 17-18.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 18.

¹⁰⁰ These British officers had previously served in the colonial India and Burma police forces. Chulalongkorn employed them as part of his modernisation programme and also in the belief that they might handle the Western consuls more effectively. Some, such as Lawson, lived in Siam for many years. Hong Lysa, ‘Extraterritoriality in Bangkok in the Reign of Chulalongkorn, 1868-1910: The Cacophony of Semi-Colonial Cosmopolitanism’, *Itinerari: European Journal of Overseas History*, 27, 2 (2003), pp. 128-9.

Bangkok more cases of serious crime were reported to the Police [5,510 cases] than in Bombay [4,053], and more than in Calcutta [2,504] and Rangoon [1,289] together.¹⁰¹

For Lawson, Bangkok's greater crime levels were due to three factors: the gambling houses, the opium dens, and the drinking saloons, all of which were open around the clock. In contrast, the other three cities had no gambling houses, and opium and alcohol consumption were more strictly regulated. Combined, these three vices made Bangkok 'one of the most criminal places in the world'.¹⁰² This perception of the gambling houses as a prime cause of crime subsequently became orthodoxy for the Bangkok force; both British and Siamese officers attributed the increase in crime in the mid-1910s to this source.¹⁰³

But the gambling houses were not only breeding grounds for crime; given the large amounts of cash on site they also made an attractive target for organised crime. Tax farmers frequently complained to the Finance Office about the unwelcome attentions of Chinese secret societies and Siamese hoodlums.¹⁰⁴ Employees and punters were harassed and sometimes violently assaulted.¹⁰⁵ One tactic of these gangs was to hurl bricks and stones into the dens, and then, in the ensuing disturbance, seize the cash from the mats and rob the customers.¹⁰⁶ Alternatively, fires were lit inside to provoke chaos. Some of these incidents were probably attempts at extortion by Chinese secret societies.¹⁰⁷ Even more seriously, bandit gangs also staged raids on

¹⁰¹ *RPAB 122* [1903/04], p. 1, 3.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*, p. 25.

¹⁰³ In 1914/15, the number of serious crimes in Bangkok town (as opposed to Bangkok province) was almost equal to those in the whole of Burma. NA R.6 N.4.1/73, 'E. W. Trotter to Yomarat, 23 Dec. 1915'; NA R.6 N.4.1/51, 'Phraya Phirentharathibodi to Trotter, 29 June 1915'.

¹⁰⁴ See for instance NA R.5 N.42.11/15, 'Chin Hoi to Finance Office, 4 June 1897'; NA R.5 N.42.11/16, 'Prince Alangkan to Phraya Phetchaphani, 15 Nov. 1897'; NA R.5 N.3.3.K/28, 'Chin Chieo to Finance Office, 27 Jan. 1898'.

¹⁰⁵ In August 1899, for example, a den manager was stabbed in the head. NA R.5 N.42.11/23, 'Chin Hu to Finance Office, 26 Aug. 1899'.

¹⁰⁶ NA R.5 N.42.11/27, 'Chin Cheng to Finance Office, 22 Oct. 1900'.

¹⁰⁷ Kanchana, [Government Policy], p. 107.

gambling dens in remote areas.¹⁰⁸ One particularly bloody example occurred in May 1902 when 36 bandits raided the Sam Rong gambling house on the outskirts of Bangkok. About 100 shots were fired, leaving nine dead and six seriously wounded. The gang made off with over 4,000 baht in cash and then plundered the homes of eight Chinese living in the area, seizing a further 5,500 baht worth of goods.¹⁰⁹ This sparked a major investigation: the culprits were eventually brought to justice and some publicly executed.¹¹⁰ Since the tax farmer was unwilling to continue paying the original auction price and it would be difficult to find another to take it on given the area's lawlessness, the government decided to close this den immediately.¹¹¹ In short, the gambling houses nurtured crime. This alone was a compelling reason for their abolition.

The *huai* Lottery

As already mentioned, the *huai* lottery was introduced into Siam from China sometime during the reign of Rama III; the exact date and circumstances of its establishment being somewhat unclear. According to Damrong, there was a drought in Siam during the early 1830s, resulting in a serious rice shortage and, in turn, a scarcity of cash. A Chinese alcohol farmer called Chin Hong told the king that the people had buried their money and suggested starting a lottery so as to encourage them to dig it up. Rama III approved of the idea and Chin Hong established the *huai* in 1835.¹¹² However, Terwiel has revealed that the records of the court astrologers

¹⁰⁸ See for instance *RPAB 120* [1901/02], p. 14; Tips, *Crime and Punishment*, pp. 94-101.

¹⁰⁹ NA R.5 N.6.2/929, 'Naret to Sommot, 17 May 1902'; 'Lawson to Naret, 18 June 1902'.

¹¹⁰ *RPAB 123* [1904/05], p. 17.

¹¹¹ NA R.5 Kh.14.1.Kh/18, 'Mahit to Chulalongkorn, 5 June 1902'; 'Chulalongkorn to Mahit, 12 June 1902'.

¹¹² B. O. Cartwright, 'The Huey Lottery', *Journal of the Siam Society*, 18 (1924), p. 221. This is essentially a direct translation of Damrong's description of the lottery, [Abolition], pp. 53-89.

date its introduction to 1829, before the bad weather occurred.¹¹³ This suggests that if the Siamese were hoarding their cash, it was not because of economic hardship. Rather, it implies that people had begun to acquire a cash surplus as a result of their involvement in the expanding export-oriented economy; in the absence of banking facilities, burying excess cash was a rational precaution against theft. The establishment of the *huai* lottery was thus a response to a growing cash economy and a mechanism for keeping cash in circulation.

The *huai* lottery was played with 34 letters of the Thai alphabet; hence, it was called *huai ko kho*, literally the ABC lottery.¹¹⁴ Each letter had a name based on that of a famous character from Chinese legend and was represented pictorially by both this individual and an animal that suggested their former birth-state (for the letter *ko* see Figure 1.2). Stories about these personages were immortalised in verse during the late nineteenth century.¹¹⁵ The fact that these were highly popular and that adults and children alike could remember all the letters by name is evidence of how the *huai* pervaded Siamese life. Winners stood to gain 30 times their original stake, with one-thirtieth being claimed by the operators as commission. The odds were not as good as those in the gambling dens but the potential prize made an attractive inducement. By picking a winner just once in ten or twenty times or by staking on ten or twenty letters and winning on one, people could expect to make some profit.¹¹⁶

¹¹³ Terwiel, *Travellers' Eyes*, p. 215-16. An account of the *huai* in the *Bangkok Times* also placed its introduction in 1829. *BTWM*, 29 March 1916.

¹¹⁴ Originally, 36 letters had been used but two were dropped, either because they were associated with trouble or because they were believed to be the most probable winning letters. Cartwright, 'The Huey Lottery', p. 225; Sthirakoses, *Looking Back*, p. 154; Bastian, *A Journey*, p. 264.

¹¹⁵ Sthirakoses, *Looking Back*, pp. 154-6. See also Cartwright, 'Huey Lottery', pp. 222-4.

¹¹⁶ Cartwright, 'Huey Lottery', p. 228. See also Sthirakoses, *Looking Back*, p. 157.



Figure 1.2: The Chinese legendary figure and animal representing the letter *ko sam huai* (Source: Sthirakoses, *Looking Back*, p. 145)

For the greater part of its existence, the *huai* lottery was limited to Bangkok and came under the remit of a single tax farm. At first there was only one draw a day but, when it was seen how profitable Chin Hong's operation was, a rival *huai* was set up, with a draw in the evening. This was short-lived, however, and the two draws were subsequently made part of the same farm. The administration of the lottery was organised like a three-tiered pyramid. At the apex was the lottery farmer, whose centre of operations was the lottery hall located, from the 1870s onwards, inside the city walls at Pratu Samyot. Here he had about 200 staff working directly for him.¹¹⁷ The next tier consisted of the district managers. Bangkok and its suburbs were divided into 38 districts (*khwaeng*), each with its own office. There were two kinds of districts, inner and outer, the classification being based on their distance from the lottery hall. The inner districts were responsible for sending the daily stakes to the lottery hall, for which they received a commission. Any winnings were paid with cash

¹¹⁷ Cartwright, 'Huey Lottery', pp. 234-5.

from the lottery hall. The outer districts, meanwhile, held onto the stakes they received but had to pay any winnings themselves.¹¹⁸ At the base of the pyramid were the lottery clerks, who were essentially sub-contractors of the district managers. These clerks could be found, sat behind their stalls waiting to receive people's stakes, throughout the city. In 1873, it was estimated that there were over a thousand in Bangkok.¹¹⁹ They took their places when the afternoon markets opened, around 4 pm, so that they might catch the market traffic. Punters would tell the clerks the letter or letters they had chosen for the morning and/or evening draw and how they wished their stake to be placed. There were several ways of staking. For instance, with the *hu* method players would re-stake the winnings, or part of, from the morning letter on another letter for the evening draw.¹²⁰ Doing the double was highly profitable: Cartwright recalls winning 155 baht 56 atts on an original stake of just 12 atts.¹²¹ The clerk would provide the punter with a stamped receipt specifying the date and details of their stake. He then made two records of the bet, one for himself and the other for the lottery hall. The latter account was called the *bai phoi*. Around 10 pm, the clerks sent the *bai phoi* to the district offices, where the accounts were then compiled. The inner districts then submitted the *bai phoi* to the lottery hall, where the draw took place. The morning letter was drawn around 1 am the evening one around 4 am. After each announcement, runners were sent out to tell the district offices and clerks the result. If the punters were not awoken by the sound of the runner shouting out the letter,¹²² then they could easily learn the result the following day from the board hanging next to the clerk's stall.

¹¹⁸ Ibid., pp. 225-6.

¹¹⁹ *Bangkok Calendar*, 1873, p. 63.

¹²⁰ Cartwright, 'Huey Lottery', p. 232; Sthirakoses, *Looking Back*, pp. 156-7.

¹²¹ Cartwright, 'Huey Lottery', p. 238. One att was 1/64 of a baht.

¹²² Sthirakoses, *Looking Back*, pp. 157-8.

Perhaps the most curious aspect of the *huai* was that the winning letter was not selected randomly; the lottery farmer chose the morning letter before any of that day's bets had been made, placed a wooden tile bearing that letter in a bag and then hung it up in the lottery hall. His decision was made after consulting the *bai phoi* for the previous week to see which letters had been heavily backed recently, hoping this might indicate which ones people were likely to back that day and thus be avoided. The evening letter was chosen after the farmer had examined the winning *bai phoi* for the morning draw.¹²³ In this sense, the farmer was playing the game as well. Regular lottery gamblers, meanwhile, had various methods for getting into the farmer's mindset: keeping records of the results and then trying to discern any particular patterns, such as how many days would pass before the farmer would draw the same letter.¹²⁴ This was actively encouraged; all the lottery clerks had a record board showing all the recent results hanging near their stall.¹²⁵ Moreover, the 34 letters were divided into six groups according to the Chinese personage associated with them for this purpose; on the days when the farmer made merit at the temple, it was believed he would draw one of the six letters in the *phra* (holy men) group, for instance.¹²⁶ The *huai* was thus a battle of wits between the farmer and the hardcore punters, with each trying to guess which letter the other might back. Indeed, when Damrong asked one lottery farmer why he did not draw a letter at random he was told that, if they were to do so, these players would lose interest and the amount staked would fall.¹²⁷ It would seem that the lottery farmers had ample opportunities for fraud but the historical record is surprisingly quiet on this. While the farmer may always have been trying to fix the result in his favour, it can be surmised that corrupt practices were kept in

¹²³ Cartwright, 'Huey Lottery', pp. 236-7; Sthirakoses, *Looking Back*, p. 159.

¹²⁴ Damrong, [Abolition], p. 61; Sthirakoses, *Looking Back*, p. 164.

¹²⁵ Sthirakoses, *Looking Back*, p. 157; *Siam Repository*, 1873, pp. 23-4.

¹²⁶ Cartwright, 'Huey Lottery', p. 228-9.

¹²⁷ Damrong, [Abolition], p. 62.

check by the fear of being exposed and the disastrous loss of custom that might result. Of course, whatever the farmer did to minimise his losses, someone was bound to have the winning letter.

There were a host of less systematic means of predicting the *huai*. People were constantly on the lookout for lucky omens – a gesture from a holy man, a strange marking on an ancient tree or a dream – as an indication of the winning letter. Offerings were made and rituals performed. Many monks, willingly or not, acquired reputations as great tipsters.¹²⁸ Indeed, there was a whole lottery-tips industry: astrologers and fortune-tellers, magic potions and books of formulas.¹²⁹ Part of the lottery's popularity was no doubt due to the way in which it appealed to people's mystical leanings and sense of fate. It is also easy to imagine market places buzzing with speculation about that day's winning letter.

Originally, the *huai* was confined to Bangkok. In 1865, however, Mongkut granted permission for it to be established in the towns of Ayutthaya and Phetchaburi. Presumably these were two separate farms to the one covering Bangkok and, given their distance from the capital, did their draws independently. Information on the Ayutthaya lottery is scarce but sources for the Phetchaburi one indicate that its establishment was a reflection of economic growth. The town had prospered as a result of the sugar industry and, since the 1850s, from the rice trade. Mongkut claimed, however, that the people had been hoarding their money; the lottery was thus established to encourage cash circulation, just as had been the case with the original one. Additionally, the revenue was to be invested in developing the country: digging canals, laying roads, and employing police to suppress banditry.¹³⁰ Neither

¹²⁸ For details of these see Cartwright, 'Huey Lottery', pp. 230-1; Sthirakoses, *Looking Back*, pp. 161-4; *Siam Repository*, 1873, p. 24; Bastian, *A Journey*, pp. 60-1.

¹²⁹ *BTWM*, 29 March 1916.

¹³⁰ Hong, *Thailand*, p. 90; Kanchana, [Government Policy], p. 46.

lottery lasted long, however; the local authorities claimed they had impoverished the people and both were abolished within a year.¹³¹ As future governments were to learn, trying to exploit people's gambling habit for economic development was, in itself, a huge gamble.

Unlike the gambling houses, which had low-class and criminal associations, the *huai* had universal appeal and was played by all sections of Bangkok society.¹³² According to Damrong, its popularity amongst the higher-classes was partly due to the fact they could play it anonymously by getting another to place a stake for them.¹³³ In the early 1870s, the most common stake was one baht – though the wealthy might bet as much as 50 baht or more – and the daily receipts of the lottery hall were apparently between 4,000 and 4,800 baht.¹³⁴ By the latter years of the *huai*'s existence this had risen to about 40,000 baht a day, out of which the lottery farmer would usually pay out around 10,000 baht.¹³⁵ The increase in lottery takings was partly due to the construction of a rail network into the provinces – the north-eastern line to Nakhon Ratchasima was completed in 1900 – which enabled people to come to Bangkok occasionally to place a stake.¹³⁶ The most popular time of year for this was the end of Buddhist Lent in October. Indeed, in 1904 passenger demand was so great that additional trains had to be put on, leading the *Bangkok Times* to conclude that 'the railways have increased the facilities for gambling.'¹³⁷ Huge crowds would gather outside the lottery hall to await the draw and the total amount staked reached as much as 150,000 baht a day, though the farmer might have had to

¹³¹ Cartwright, 'Huey Lottery', p. 222; Kanchana, [Government Policy], p. 47.

¹³² Sthirakoses, *Looking Back*, p. 157; *BTWM*, 29 March 1916.

¹³³ Damrong, [Abolition], p. 90.

¹³⁴ *Bangkok Calendar*, 1873, p. 64.

¹³⁵ Cartwright, 'Huey Lottery', p. 239.

¹³⁶ *RFAB 1902-03*, p. 4.

¹³⁷ *BTWM*, 26 Oct. 1904.

pay out large sums.¹³⁸ Clearly, the *huai* was a highly profitable enterprise for the lottery farmers, most of whom were Chinese. Indeed, only three Siamese held the monopoly during Chulalongkorn's reign.¹³⁹ As Chapter 2 will show, this Chinese dominance was a critical concern behind the abolition of the *huai*. Nevertheless, compared with the gambling houses, the lottery was considerably less problematic for the state. The revenue it provided was much more stable and the farmer less likely to default. Indeed, throughout its existence, there was apparently only one holder who was unable to make his payments to the Finance Office.¹⁴⁰

Other Forms of Gambling

Besides those discussed so far, there was a plethora of other activities, indigenous and imported, on which people in Siam gambled. During the early 1850s, a tax farm on 17 games – including cock, bird and fish fighting; a number of card and dice games; and various types of racing involving boats, horses, and ox-carts – was set up, covering all the towns in the Central Plain and the lower north.¹⁴¹ The farmer received a commission on all stakes on these games. As with the other farms, he commonly sublet his monopoly rights. It seems this farm was later broadened to include other activities on an ad-hoc, regional basis. Kanchana sees this as primarily a revenue raising measure but it can also be seen as an attempt to regulate, and thereby restrict, an upsurge in gambling.¹⁴² Indeed, the state revenue it provided was but a fraction of that from the dens and the *huai*.¹⁴³

¹³⁸ Ibid.; Cartwright, 'Huey Lottery', p. 239. For a breakdown of daily takings and the farmer's profit over the end of Buddhist Lent in 1913 see *BTWM*, 17 Oct. 1913.

¹³⁹ *BTWM*, 29 March 1916.

¹⁴⁰ Cartwright, 'Huey Lottery', p. 239.

¹⁴¹ For the complete lists of games and towns see Kanchana, [Government Policy], pp. 23 fn. 44, 49 fn. 47.

¹⁴² Kanchana, [Government Policy], pp. 49-50.

¹⁴³ For a comparison of the revenue from these farms during the Fourth Reign see Wilson, 'State and Society', pp. 995-6.

Animal fights, and the obligatory betting, were immensely popular with men throughout the country: perhaps none more so than cockfighting, the quintessential pastime of the Siamese cultivator (see Figure 1.3).



Figure 1.3: Temple mural of a cockfight (Source: Pairote Samosorn, *E-sarn Mural Paintings*, Bangkok: E-sarn Cultural Center, Khon Khaen University, 1989, p. 236)

During his sojourn in the northeast in the 1880s, Etienne Aymonier spent some time observing how cockfights were conducted. Fights were held everyday; the day he arrived there were about ten spectators, who bet more than ten baht in total, and the local tax farmer, waiting to collect his commission.¹⁴⁴ Considering the popularity of cockfighting in the entire South East Asian realm, Anthony Reid suggests this was due to 'the close identification of the rooster with the male ego.'¹⁴⁵ Cockfighting and the associated wagers thereby performed the function of a status signifier. He concludes:

The apparently frenzied betting was motivated not so much by the hope of big winning as by identification with the kin group, faction, or village of the cock's owner. The cockfight was therefore a vivid dramatization both of the solidarity of the vertically organized group and of the hostilities generated in its endless status competition with other groups.¹⁴⁶

Bullfighting was unique to the south: two bulls were set upon each other, butting and shoving until one was driven off (see Figure 1.4).¹⁴⁷ Another curiosity for the Westerner was the Siamese fighting fish (see Figure 1.5).¹⁴⁸ Other such contests involved rams, buffalo, birds and even crickets.

¹⁴⁴ Etienne Aymonier, *Isan Travels: Northeast Thailand's Economy in 1883-1884*, trans. Walter E. J. Tips, Bangkok: White Lotus, 2000 [1895, 1897], p. 173

¹⁴⁵ Anthony Reid, *Southeast Asia in the Age of Commerce, 1450-1680. Volume One: The Lands Below the Winds*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988, p. 193.

¹⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 194.

¹⁴⁷ For a detailed description of a bullfight see W. A. Graham, *Kelantan, A State of the Malay Peninsula: A Handbook of Information*, Glasgow: James Maclehose & Sons, 1908, pp. 118-20.

¹⁴⁸ Ernest Young, *Peeps At Many Lands: Siam* (2nd ed. revised W. A. Graham), London: A & C Black, 1927, p. 23; Bock, *Temples and Elephants*, p. 35.



Figure 1.4: A bull fight (Source: Graham, *Kelantan*, facing p. 118)



Figure 1.5: Placing bets on Siamese fighting-fish (Source: Young, *Kingdom of the Yellow Robe*, p. 151)

People would gamble on anything given the opportunity. While in Chiang Mai in the early 1880s, Carl Bock witnessed a trial by water, held to resolve a dispute between two officials over the ownership of some slaves. Two men were chosen to represent the disputants; whoever remained under water the longest would be the winner. Predictably, there was much betting amongst the spectators who lined the riverbank.¹⁴⁹ Even an activity as innocuous as kite-flying provided opportunities for gambling, with people betting on the outcome of dogfights (see Figure 1.6).¹⁵⁰ This was a Bangkok phenomenon: from the 1890s onwards, contests were held on the Sanam Luang field near the Grand Palace. These attracted large numbers of people, including the aristocracy, and the sport enjoyed the patronage of the king.¹⁵¹

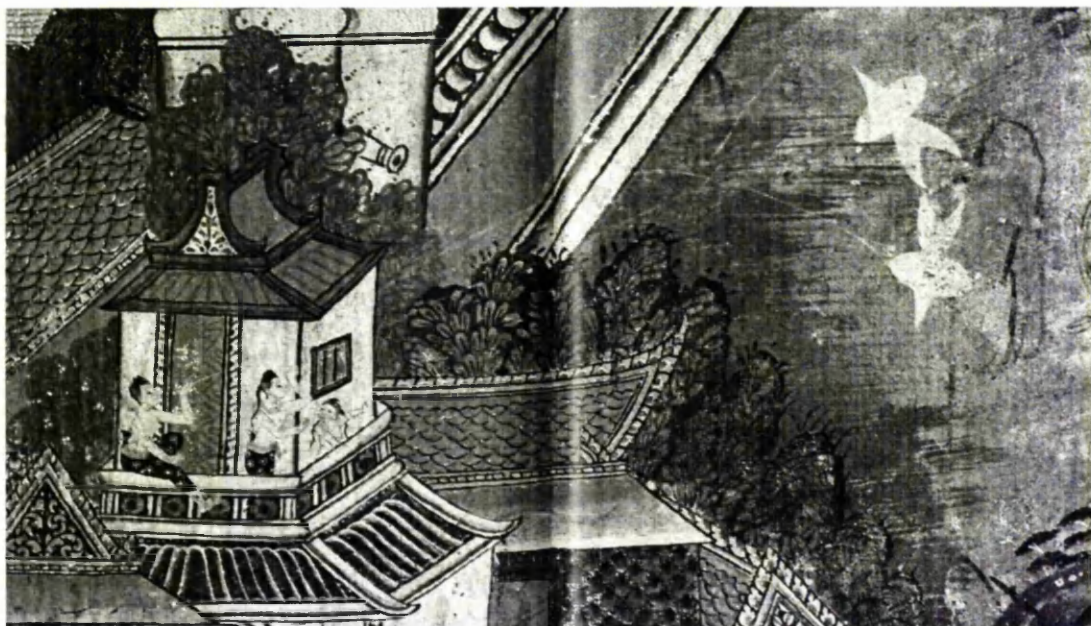


Figure 1.6: Temple mural of a kite-flying contest (Source: Pairrote, *E-sarn Mural Paintings*, p. 234-5)

¹⁴⁹ Bock, *Temples and Elephants*, pp. 233-6.

¹⁵⁰ For descriptions of these kite-flying contests see Mr. and Mrs. Emile Jottrand, *In Siam: The Diary of A Legal Adviser to King Chulalongkorn's Government*, trans. Walter E. J. Tips, Bangkok: White Lotus, 1996 [1905], pp. 139-41; Young, *Kingdom of the Yellow Robe*, pp. 150-3; Wright and Breakspear (eds), *Twentieth Century Impressions*, pp. 236-7.

¹⁵¹ Sombat Plainoi, *Sorties into Thai Cultural History*, Bangkok: Ministry of Education, 1982, pp. 36-7.

Playing cards, and the games played with them, were apparently introduced into Siam from China during the Third Reign. These cards were modified to suit the Siamese and became known as *phai phong thai* or *phai tong*. A pack consisted of 120 cards numbered one to 10 and divided into three suits – people, birds, and vegetables – with four of each number (see Figure 1.7 for some examples).¹⁵² Cards became a favourite pastime and a factory for producing them was established in Bangkok (see Figure 1.8).¹⁵³ With the opening of the country to Western trade from the 1850s came Western cards and games. Collectively these were called *phai pok*, the second word probably being derived from the word poker.¹⁵⁴



Figure 1.7: Chinese and Thai playing cards (Source: Anek, *Phai phong thai*, p. 18)

¹⁵² Anek Bunyaphakdi, *Phai phong thai* [Thai Card Games], Bangkok: Cremation Volume, 1967, pp. 12-13.

¹⁵³ *BTWM*, 25 Oct. 1913.

¹⁵⁴ Anek, [Card Games], pp. 11-12.



Figure 1.8: Siamese men and women playing cards (Source: Baker and Pasuk, *Thailand*, p. 100)

Bets were also placed on board games such as *duat*, which was similar to backgammon and played with dice and cowries (see Figure 1.9), dice games, such as *hi-lo* (see Figure 1.10), and games using dominoes, such as *to tem*. At the assorted festivals and fairs that punctuated the year there were a number of other gambling games, such as *mai mun* (a Siamese version of roulette) and *nam tao* (matching pictures on dice with those on a board). As the following chapters will show, new games were constantly springing up, while others fell out of fashion. In the first two decades of the Fifth Reign, for instance, the Chinese introduced the game *huai chap yiki* (twelve-letter lottery). Gambling house farmers asked that it be included in their monopoly but Chulalongkorn refused and the game was prohibited.¹⁵⁵

¹⁵⁵ Damrong, [Abolition], p. 18; *PKPS*, 11, pp. 180-1.



Figure 1.9: Siamese men playing a game with cowries (Source: Fournereau, Lucien, *Bangkok in 1892*, trans. Walter E. J. Tips, Bangkok: White Lotus, 1998 [1894], backcover)



Figure 1.10: Temple mural of a Chinese man hosting a game of *hi-lo* (Source: Preecha Kanchanakom, Sinchai Krabuansaeng, Marut Amranondha and Kamol Chayawatana, *Dhonburi Mural Painting*, Bangkok: The Society for the Conservation of National Art Treasures and Environment, 1980, p. 69)



Figure 1.11: Temple mural of a Chinese man hosting a game of three-stick trick (Source: Preecha et al., *Dhonburi Mural Paintings*, p. 68)

The Players

Every section of Siamese society gambled: from princes to slaves, Chinese merchants to coolies, government officials to farmers, and monks to children. Indeed, for Western contemporaries, it was *the* Siamese vice.¹⁵⁶ Given their imperial or proselytising ambitions, they may have had reason for exaggeration but there is compelling evidence that gambling was a feature of daily life. Its ubiquity is most graphically represented by the numerous depictions of people gambling in temple murals (see Figures 1.10 and 1.11 for instance). The size of state gambling revenue is

¹⁵⁶ See for instance *Siam Repository*, 1874, p. 413; Smyth, *Five Years*, II, p. 255; J. G. D. Campbell, *Siam in the Twentieth Century: Being the Experiences and Impressions of a British Official*, London: Edward Arnold, 1902, p. 148; P. A. Thompson, *Lotus Land: Being an Account of the Country of Siam and the People of Southern Siam*, London: T. Werner Laurie, 1906, p. 65.

also a strong indicator. This section will focus on gambling by the aristocracy and by children. The involvement of monks will be discussed in Chapter 4.

Numerous Western sources from the first half of the nineteenth century commented on the Siamese elite's penchant for gambling, even Rama III was said to gamble by proxy.¹⁵⁷ The clearest indication of the extent of this passion, however, is the various prohibitions on gambling by state officials and royalty. Rama I, for instance, forbade all officials from playing *thua po (len bia)*: offenders were to be whipped 90 times, reduced to the status of a commoner (*phrai*), and tattooed upon their forehead.¹⁵⁸ Mongkut, meanwhile, attempted to prohibit gambling within the royal palace after there had been a serious theft, motivated by gambling debts.¹⁵⁹ Kanchana highlights how the nobility were the first to take part in new games that then filtered down to the rest of society.¹⁶⁰ Indeed, the palace was the conduit for many innovations; Rama III was apparently the first to play cards.¹⁶¹ What is interesting is how the various residents of different status gambled together in the royal palaces.¹⁶² In 1893, for instance, two concubines of the king (*chao chom*) were found playing *thua* with four household slaves in the Bang Pa-In palace. One of the concubines justified their behaviour by explaining that since the slaves often sneaked out to gamble during the night, it was preferable to let them gamble within the palace.¹⁶³ Furthermore, while Damrong claims the aristocracy were unlikely to show their faces in the gambling houses, they did on occasion.¹⁶⁴ During the Fourth Reign, for example, one minor prince lost 260 baht on *po* over the course of two visits to a

¹⁵⁷ Terwiel, *Travellers' Eyes*, pp. 214-15. See also Frederick Arthur Neale, *Narrative of a Residence in Siam*, Bangkok: White Lotus, 1996 [1852], pp. 143-4.

¹⁵⁸ Damrong, [Abolition], p. 13.

¹⁵⁹ PKPS, 5, pp. 65-71; Kanchana, [Government Policy], pp. 84-5.

¹⁶⁰ Kanchana, [Government Policy], p. 104.

¹⁶¹ BTWM, 25 Oct. 1913.

¹⁶² King Chulalongkorn, *Phithi songkran* [Songkran ceremonies], Bangkok: Cremation Volume for Bamrung Sisombun, 1978, p. 93.

¹⁶³ NA R.5 N.11.3.K/6, 'Chaiyan to Chulalongkorn, 25 Oct. 1893'.

¹⁶⁴ Damrong, [Abolition], p. 90.

den.¹⁶⁵ This suggests that gambling had the power to cut across the hierarchies within Siamese society. In other words, everybody, from the highest to the lowest, gambled and, on occasion, they did so together.

Western observers often commented on how the gambling passion was instilled in the Siamese from a young age.¹⁶⁶ There were many opportunities to learn the mechanics of gambling. Children could commonly be seen playing *yot lum* – a game similar to marbles played with coins that also doubled as the stakes – in the streets.¹⁶⁷ Parents often visited the gambling houses with their children in tow: ‘it is no uncommon thing to see little creatures of seven or eight years old... joining, with all the zest imaginable, in “backing” the luck of older gamblers.’¹⁶⁸ More sinisterly, unscrupulous characters cheated children out of their cash and jewellery by using card tricks and such like.¹⁶⁹ In short, children grew up in an environment where gambling was pervasive and their participation in it encouraged. Chulalongkorn realised, therefore, that to wean people off gambling he would have to start with the young. In the mid-1870s, three acts were passed with this purpose in mind. Under the first, adults were prohibited from playing games such as three-stick trick (*mai sam an*) with children; offenders were to be whipped 30 times and fined. Additionally, gambling house managers were instructed to stop fifteen year-olds and under from playing *thua po*. Finally, parents were to prevent children from playing a range of games that might lead to more hardcore forms of gambling.¹⁷⁰ The two subsequent acts prohibited further games.¹⁷¹ This underlines a key dynamic in the legislative process:

¹⁶⁵ Wilson, ‘State and Society’, p. 503.

¹⁶⁶ Hallett, *Thousand Miles*, p. 237; *BTWM*, 9 July 1904.

¹⁶⁷ Thompson, *Lotus Land*, p. 203; Sthirakoses, *Looking Back*, p. 140.

¹⁶⁸ Bock, *Temples and Elephants*, p. 131.

¹⁶⁹ *PKPS*, 9, pp. 204-5; Tips, *Crime and Punishment*, p. 165.

¹⁷⁰ *PKPS*, 8, pp. 207-11.

¹⁷¹ *PKPS*, 8, pp. 224-5; *PKPS*, 9, pp. 204-6.

the forms of gambling in Siam were constantly evolving as a response to legislation, thereby necessitating further legislation.

If the country suffered from a gambling mania, as Westerners and the Siamese elite both claimed, then how can it be explained? The attraction of certain games has already been mentioned but it is worthwhile considering some more general reasons. Unfortunately, there are, to the best of my knowledge, no anthropological studies of gambling in a Thai context; the following discussion will thus be based on the observations of contemporaries and studies on the psychology of gambling in different cultures. Damrong recognised that there were two reasons as to why people gambled: for money and for fun (*sanuk*), of which he believed the latter to be the more important.¹⁷² This was also the view of Westerner visitors: 'In the gambling-houses of this phlegmatic people neither party – the banker nor those that play – seem to care a whit whether they win or lose; only let them enjoy their excitement, and that seems to satisfy even the unfortunate.'¹⁷³ Another explained the average coolie's propensity to gamble away all his pay as follows: 'It is his form of amusement and he never contemplates the possibility of making any money by it.'¹⁷⁴ Kanchana also emphasises this leisure aspect, arguing that as a largely agrarian society, the majority of the population had large amounts of free-time, some four to seven months a year, between harvesting and planting; free-time that would be spent gambling.¹⁷⁵ Gambling, with all its risks and thrills, is thus portrayed as an escape from the humdrum realities and hardships of everyday life. But, while no doubt true, this is a

¹⁷² NA R.5 M.2.11/12, 'Report on meeting of provincial governors, 16 Sept. 1905'.

¹⁷³ Maxwell Sommerville, *Siam On the Meinam: From the Gulf to Ayuthia*, Bangkok: White Lotus, 1985 [1897], pp. 87-8.

¹⁷⁴ Thompson, *Lotus Land*, p. 65.

¹⁷⁵ Kanchana, [Government Policy], pp. 31-2.

conventional explanation for the appeal of gambling in many cultural settings;¹⁷⁶ it does little to illuminate the specifics of Siamese/Thai gambling.

Gambling in Siam had an important social function. It was an integral part of the various ceremonies and festivals that measured the rhythm of life. For instance, permission might be sought from the tax farmer for *thua po* to be played at a child's top-knot shaving ceremony.¹⁷⁷ Moreover, the only times people were allowed to gamble freely without the permission of the tax farmer were during the Chinese New Year, the Siamese New Year and Songkran.¹⁷⁸ These were occasions when taboos were lifted and license given for indulgence. This social dimension is one aspect that Ellen Oxfeld Basu emphasises in her study of gambling and entrepreneurship amongst the overseas Hakka Chinese community in Calcutta.¹⁷⁹ Her study offers other observations that, in addition to being pertinent to the Chinese in Siam, may also give some insight into Siamese gambling. Status and hierarchy are important facets of both cultures; gambling is a means of confirming and, occasionally, overcoming them. First, high-stakes gambling is a form of conspicuous consumption: it enables the well-off to display their wealth and confirm their status by showing indifference to large-scale gambling losses. Moreover, gambling, as a contest, provides opportunities for displays of character; to show how one acts when faced with loss.¹⁸⁰ Within Thai society a great premium is placed on remaining cool-headed (*chai yen*) when under pressure, gambling is a way of illustrating this characteristic. In other words, one may lose large amounts of money through gambling but gain

¹⁷⁶ Munting, *Economic and Social History*, pp. 189-90.

¹⁷⁷ Damrong, [Abolition], p. 21.

¹⁷⁸ *Bangkok Calendar*, 1873, p. 67. Damrong dates this dispensation back to the reign of King Taksin (1767-1782), attributing it as a morale raising measure during those years of conflict, [Abolition], pp. 12-13.

¹⁷⁹ Ellen Oxfeld Basu, 'Profit, Loss, and Fate: The Entrepreneurial Ethic and the Practice of Gambling in an Overseas Chinese Community', *Modern China*, 17, 2 (April 1991), pp. 244-6.

¹⁸⁰ *Ibid*, pp. 251-4.

prestige and respect in return. Lastly, luck recognises no social hierarchy. In the case of the two royal concubines gambling with their slaves mentioned earlier, those slaves had as good a chance of winning at *thua* as their more illustrious hosts. Perhaps part of gambling's appeal was that it offered an escape from the rules of a highly stratified society, a chance for people of different status to interact with each other, albeit briefly, as equals.

One major difference between Siamese and Chinese, however, is their attitude towards money. Within Siamese society, there was much less emphasis on capital accumulation, with status being determined by birth and ability, martial or ecclesiastical. So long as one had enough for the basic welfare, why save? There were other factors that militated against the Siamese cultivator saving. First, there was a lack of banking facilities meaning that come the end of the harvest season, they had money in their pockets but nowhere to keep it safely, besides burying it.¹⁸¹ Second, their income was intermittent and came in large chunks, principally, once the cultivator had sold their crop. In his study of working-class gambling in Britain around the turn of the twentieth century, R. McKibbin notes that it was an irregularity of income, combined with other factors, to create 'a rhythm of debt and credit of which gambling was to become an intrinsic part.'¹⁸² Under these circumstances, he argues that betting by the working-class can be seen as a 'rational' activity.¹⁸³ An irregular income may thus have encouraged gambling among Siamese farmers. Lastly, some commentators have noted that the Thai tendency to live for the moment rather than invest for the future makes them more predisposed towards gambling.¹⁸⁴

¹⁸¹ Virginia Thompson, *Thailand: The New Siam*, New York: MacMillan, 1941, p. 694.

¹⁸² R. McKibbin, 'Working-Class Gambling in Britain, 1880-1939', *Past and Present*, 82 (Feb. 1979), p. 161.

¹⁸³ *Ibid.*, pp. 161-3.

¹⁸⁴ Robert Cooper and Nanthapa Cooper, *Culture Shock! Thailand: A Survival Guide to Customs and Etiquette*, Singapore: Marshall Cavendish Editions, 2005, p. 72.

The Case Against Gambling

Although Chulalongkorn's predecessors recognised the harmful effects of gambling, little was done to restrict it.¹⁸⁵ Such laws that did exist were primarily concerned with safeguarding the profitability of the gambling farms for the tax farmers, thereby ensuring the steady provision of revenue to the state. The first two Chakri monarchs prohibited a number of games, including cockfighting, on the grounds that they were cruel to animals, against Buddhist precepts, and a cause of arguments and fraud. Of greater importance, though, was the fact that these games were so popular, cockfighting especially, that they were drawing people away from the gambling houses, resulting in a drop in revenue. Certain games were forbidden, therefore, so that the dens might prosper.¹⁸⁶ In short, the underlying rationale for the restriction of these games was financial. However, the Siamese state lacked the administrative apparatus to make such a ban effective; the Catholic missionary Bishop Pallegoix, who travelled widely throughout the kingdom in the mid-nineteenth century, notes that the prohibition on cockfighting was ignored.¹⁸⁷ Conversely, Mongkut's decision to allow tax farms on these other forms of gambling stemmed from the realisation that it was better to regulate gambling, and thereby derive some revenue from it, than to impose unenforceable laws.¹⁸⁸ Financial necessity was thus a reason both for the restriction of gambling and for its promotion by the state. As the following chapters will show, this tension was a feature of government policy on gambling for many years to come. The difficulties of enforcement were also to remain a critical determinant in policy.

¹⁸⁵ Apparently, Mongkut first suggested abolishing the gambling farms in 1859/60 but his proposal received no support from his ministers. Kanchana, [Government Policy], p. 116.

¹⁸⁶ Ibid., pp. 27-8.

¹⁸⁷ Jean-Baptiste Pallegoix, *Description of the Thai Kingdom of Siam*, trans. Walter E. J. Tips, Bangkok: White Lotus, 2000 [1854], p. 123.

¹⁸⁸ Kanchana, [Government Policy], pp. 49-50.

Chulalongkorn was the first king to be in a position to seriously attempt to restrict gambling. His extensive administrative reforms of the Siamese state during the latter part of the nineteenth century and early twentieth established an unprecedented degree of control over what is present-day Thailand, with power centralised in Bangkok. A number of reasons for the restriction of gambling have already been considered but these have tended to focus on its associations with the Chinese and the structural problems of the tax farming system rather than the undesirability of gambling itself. These other arguments against gambling will be discussed in the following chapters but here it is worth examining their general thrust. Throughout the period covered by this study, the Siamese elite referred to gambling as 'a corrosive vice' (*abaiyamuk*) and, more commonly, 'an evil thing' (*pen khong chua-rai*) that led people into poverty and 'utter ruin' (*khvam chip-hai*).¹⁸⁹ The metaphor of disease was also employed. For example, Chaophraya Wongsanupraphat (M. R. W. Sathan Sanitwong), a government minister during the last years of the Fifth Reign and throughout the Sixth, described gambling as 'this cancer which is eating into our bones'.¹⁹⁰ Similarly, when Damrong assessed whether the gambling houses or the *huai* was more harmful, he compared the speed with which the two drove people into poverty: 'a loser in the gambling den was like a cholera patient, while the lottery addict was a tuberculosis patient. Of course, both were bound to die, but one at a slower rate than the other.'¹⁹¹ This disease had infected the Siamese people, corrupting their morals and behaviour.¹⁹² As Chaophraya Wongsanupraphat put it, the Siamese cultivator suffered from 'the general thriftlessness, uneconomical

¹⁸⁹ See for instance *PKPS*, 11, p. 180 NA R.6 N.4.1/9, 'Explanation of how to play *tomsuk* as played by people in monthon Udon, 3 May 1911'; NA R.6 N.11.5.Ch/17, 'Ministry of the Interior consultation on Class 2 gambling'.

¹⁹⁰ NA R.6 KS.1/4, 'Memorandum on our Domestic Economy, 7 Dec. 1910'.

¹⁹¹ Damrong, [Abolition], pp. 90-1.

¹⁹² *Ibid.*, p. 90; NA R.7 Kh.2/2, 'Prince Boriphat to King Prajadhipok, 8 Aug. 1928'.

habits, and the lack of sufficient energy in their work. All of which has been mostly brought about by long years of the gambling habit which is ingrained in their bones.'¹⁹³

The symptoms of this gambling disease were poverty, debt slavery, and crime. With regard to the last of these, it was not only the gambling houses that nurtured criminal activity. Both the Siamese elite and Western residents considered gambling in general to be a prime cause of robbery, theft, banditry, plunder, and murder.¹⁹⁴ A few examples will illustrate this point. In 1907, for instance, there was an outbreak of banditry in the Central Plain. Damrong attributed this to migrant Lao farmhands and coolies who had gambled away all their savings and were unable to return home to the Northeast. With nowhere to live and no job, they had resorted to banditry.¹⁹⁵ Similarly, there was said to be an increase in crime after the three main holiday periods when free gambling was allowed.¹⁹⁶ At a more personal level, an elderly resident of Bang Chan village recalled that as a young man in the 1920s he had once stolen some paddy and sold it so as to get money for gambling.¹⁹⁷ Besides turning to crime, it was widely believed that impoverished gamblers sold themselves and their families into slavery. In the 1890s, for instance, H. Warrington Smyth attributed 'half the slavery ... to the reckless love of gambling'.¹⁹⁸ Chulalongkorn also made this connection in the 1874 proclamation on the restriction of slavery.¹⁹⁹ In his thesis on

¹⁹³ NA R.6 KS.1/4, 'Memorandum on our Domestic Economy'.

¹⁹⁴ See for instance NA R.5 N.8.1.216, 'Special Report on Crime in the two Divisions of the Suburbs with recommendations with a view to reduce Crime and improve the administration of Criminal Justice and Police, Lawson, 29 April 1902'; NA R.7 Kh.2/2, 'Boriphat to Prajadhipok, 8 Aug. 1928'; Jottrand, *In Siam*, p. 10. A judge in the British Consular Court thought nine-tenths of the crime in Siam was attributable to gambling, though this was more likely to have been a hunch than a statistically-proven fact. *BTWM*, 9 July 1904.

¹⁹⁵ NA R.5 N.6.2/963, 'Damrong to Chulalongkorn, 5 March 1907'.

¹⁹⁶ *PKPS*, 26, p. 286.

¹⁹⁷ Lauriston Sharp and Lucien Hanks, *Bang Chan: Social History of a Rural Community in Thailand*, Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1978, pp. 138-9.

¹⁹⁸ Smyth, *Five Years*, vol. II, p. 255.

¹⁹⁹ Hallett, *Thousand Miles*, p. 238.

Siamese agriculture, Prince Dilok described the causal link between gambling and slavery in detail:

According to old customs and traditions there were ... great feasts after the harvest time with gambling too and farmers often lost not only their cash money but also their farm-yard and all their possessions. Also, when farmers went with their crop on ships and boats to Bangkok and other great cities to sell it and they had completed their sales, they often went into gambling houses there and when they had lost their crops' proceeds they took, devoid of means, a loan against debt-serfdom. Often, they also immediately gambled away this loan in the gambling houses and piled up their debts with a new loan which they could no longer pay with their home and farm. Numerous Siamese have become debt slaves through gambling.²⁰⁰

This assessment is supported by the testimony of some commoners. Following the first decree restricting the buying and selling of slaves in 1874, some complained that they were no longer able to sell their children in order to pay off gambling debts and wondered when gambling might also be prohibited.²⁰¹ At first glance, the Siamese elite's concern with gambling as a cause of slavery might be taken solely as a humanitarian impulse but there was a deeper, underlying reason for the restriction of both activities.

Western influence should not be underestimated. As contacts with the West increased and the British and French empires advanced across mainland South East Asia, the Siamese elite of Mongkut's generation were exposed to, and absorbed, the Western conceptions of 'civilisation' and 'progress'.²⁰² In this process, they came to perceive Siam as occupying a mid-point on a sliding scale of civilisational achievement, with the West at the high end and 'barbarian' peoples, such as the hill-tribes, at the other. Being civilised, or *siwilai* as it was transliterated into Thai, was

²⁰⁰ Dilok, *Rural Economy*, p. 36.

²⁰¹ Chatchai Panananon, 'Siamese "Slavery": The Institution and its Abolition', PhD dissertation, University of Michigan, 1982, p. 236. For examples of the connection between gambling and slavery see *ibid.*, 76.

²⁰² The following discussion is drawn from Thongchai Winichakul, 'The Quest for "Siwilai": A Geographical Discourse of Civilizational Thinking in the Late Nineteenth and Early Twentieth-Century Siam', *Journal of Asian Studies*, 59, 3 (Aug. 2000), pp. 528-49; Scott Barmé, *Luang Wichit Wathakan and the Creation of a Thai Identity*, Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 1993, pp. 18-21; Kullada, *Rise and Decline*, pp. 36-7.

associated with Western practices and modes of conduct. Moreover, they were acutely aware of how the imperial powers used these concepts to justify colonial intervention. For Mongkut, therefore, it was imperative that the Siamese become more civilised. But, as Thongchai Winichakul argues, the 'quest for *siwilai*' was not just a defensive reaction but also an attempt 'to attain and confirm the relative superiority of Siam; as the traditional imperial power in the region, Siam was anxious about its position among modern nations.'²⁰³ It was thus a strategy for preserving Siamese dignity and independence. In this context, 'uncivilised' practices such as polygamy and slavery came under intense scrutiny and criticism from some sections of the elite. As the following chapters will show, certain gambling games were also to be dubbed uncivilised.

The concept of *siwilai* also had strong connotations of material progress and economic development, with a society's level of civilisation being determined by the nature of its economic system. The traditional manpower system came to be seen as backward and barbarian; trade and taxation were the economic basis of a modern, civilised state's power.²⁰⁴ As Barmé highlights: 'Given this particular formulation, such developments as the expansion in commodity production and increased trade with the West represented Siam's gradual progress along the path to civilization.'²⁰⁵ In other words, being civilised meant integration into and production for the world economy. The quest for *siwilai* thus gave further justification for and impetus to the reduction of labour controls. It made the abolition of slavery an economic imperative for those sections of the elite, specifically the faction led by the Bunnag noble family, that stood to profit from increased participation in the world economy. Kullada

²⁰³ Thongchai, 'Quest for "*Siwilai*"', p. 529.

²⁰⁴ Kullada, *Rise and Decline*, p. 36.

²⁰⁵ Barmé, *Luang Wichit*, pp. 20-1.

emphasises how restricting gambling was part of this attack on slavery.²⁰⁶ But, more fundamentally, it was a way of making Siamese cultivators more effective producers. Finally, the quest for *siwilai* led to a new awareness of the role of the state; it now had a central role in developing the country. However, the state was not only responsible for promoting trade, it was also responsible for stamping out bad habits such as gambling.²⁰⁷

To sum up, just as the spread of gambling within Siam was a symptom of socio-economic changes in the first half of the nineteenth century, the move towards restriction was a symptom of further such changes in the second half. It was also a reflection of an ideological shift within the elite as they sought to accommodate Western norms and economic ambitions.

²⁰⁶ Kullada, *Rise and Decline*, pp. 46-7.

²⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 51.

Government Gambling Policy and Legislation, 1887-1917

This chapter will chart the development and implementation of the Siamese government's policy on gambling from the late 1880s until the abolition of the gambling house tax farms in 1917. It will pick up on the themes introduced in Chapter 1 – the influence of Chinese entrepreneurs and the West, the quest for *siwilai*, the damaging socio-economic effects of gambling – and determine their influence over the government's restrictionist policy. The success of this policy will also be assessed.

Closure of the Gambling Houses

Between 1887 and 1917, all the gambling houses within the kingdom were gradually closed and the tax farms responsible for them abolished. It was a lengthy process because the revenue they provided was crucial to the state and alternative sources of income had to be found; closing all of them at once would have been financially disastrous. Nevertheless, this was the most significant part of the absolute monarchy's attempt to restrict opportunities for legal gambling: the closure of the last dens in 1917 marked the end of an institution that had been a feature of life in Siam for over 150 years. This process has been detailed elsewhere but, for the purposes of this study, it is necessary to present an overview of it.¹

Although Chulalongkorn first raised the possibility of abolishing the gambling farms back in the early 1870s, it seems this was just a ploy to secure the support of the former regent, Somdet Chaophraya Si Suriyawong (Chuang Bunnag), for his early

¹ Kanchana, [Government Policy], Ch. 4; Damrong, [Abolition], pp. 35-52; Brown, *Ministry of Finance*, pp. 23-4, 88-92.

fiscal reforms.² Indeed, the gambling farms were some of the few tax farms under the direct control of the crown and, as Kullada notes, it was unlikely that the king was willing to give up such a key source of revenue at this time.³ It was not until the late 1880s that Chulalongkorn was in a sufficiently strong financial and political position to seriously contemplate closing the gambling houses. By this time, the key figures of the old order, Suriyawong included, had passed away and the king had appointed his brothers as heads of the great ministries of state. Under the stewardship of Prince Narathip Praphanphong, first the Finance Office and then the reformed Ministry of Finance had assumed control of all the kingdom's tax farms. It was these institutions that were to administer the closure of the gambling houses.

This process can be divided into three phases. Bangkok was the focus of the first phase that took place between 1888 and 1893, during which the number of gambling houses within the capital was reduced from over 400 to 16. The first declaration of closures, issued by the Finance Office in 1887, made the reasons for this restrictionist policy explicit: the Siamese had become hopelessly addicted to the 'evil' Chinese games of *thua po*, wasting both time and money that would be better invested in trade. Moreover, these games were compared unfavourably with traditional Siamese activities that involved betting, such as boat races and cockfighting. It was the Chinese and their games that had corrupted the Siamese. But just as the Chinese were blamed for the gambling problem, they were also used to justify the gradualist aspect to this policy: some dens were to remain open because closing all of them at once would anger the Chinese.⁴ The implication was that the Chinese were unable to give up their gambling habit but the Siamese could. No

² For a detailed discussion of these initial reforms and their political context see Kullada, *Rise and Decline*, pp. 51-8.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 58.

⁴ *PKPS*, 11, pp. 126-8.

mention is made of the other reason for a gradual reduction in the number of dens, namely, that the government wished to see how limited closures would affect revenue from the gambling farms. By October 1890 at the latest, it is clear that the government had no intention of closing all the Bangkok establishments in the immediate future. In correspondence with the king, Narathip identified 16 as the optimum number and noted that their abolition would be impossible while there were no alternative revenue sources.⁵ Just as the Siamese population were 'addicted' to gambling, the Siamese state was addicted to gambling revenue. In the absence of an equally lucrative substitute, it was unable to go cold turkey.

These initial closures were just one aspect of government policy during this period. Comprehensive regulations for the dens, combining new and existing rules, were issued;⁶ these subjected the gambling house farmer and his operations to a greater degree of state scrutiny and control. The remaining 16 dens were transferred to permanent, state-owned premises that were then rented to the tax farmer.⁷ These were located away from the city's major roads and waterways so as to discourage passers-by from entering.⁸ Furthermore, these were the only places where games of *thua po* could now be conducted, depriving the gambling farmer of the right to set these games up in the homes of private patrons. Other regulations included the fixing of opening hours from 7 am to 12 am and the requirement that police officers be stationed in every den to maintain order. The latter provision was not the only state encroachment on what had been the gambling farmer's personal fiefdom; when

⁵ NA R.5 Kh.14.1.Kh/1, 'Narathip to Chulalongkorn, 5 Oct. 1890 & 15 Oct. 1891'.

⁶ One set of regulations was issued in October 1891 and a further set in March 1893. For both sets see *PKPS*, 13, pp. 51-60, 280-4.

⁷ Anuman describes a typical government-built den as 'a large tile-roofed hall, without any ceiling and with cement walls. The front wall was lower in height and topped with an iron grill. Such a building normally had two or three entrances with pots of *saladaï* [a cactus-like shrub] hanging in the doorway.' Sthirakoses, *Looking Back*, p. 143.

⁸ *PKPS*, 13, p. 43.

arresting illegal gamblers he now had to be accompanied by either the district chief (*nai amphoe*) or the police, and he no longer had the power to whip or detain offenders. Perhaps the only part of these regulations that worked to the advantage of the tax farmer was the effective merger of the farm covering betting on animal fights and such like with the gambling house farms. This meant the gambling house farmer now had the right to collect license fees for the playing of these games and receive any fines from people convicted of playing them illegally. More than likely, however, this was merely official recognition of an already existing practice, namely, that the same tax farmer commonly held the monopolies on both categories of gambling.

These regulations had a dual purpose: to limit gambling and safeguard state revenue. As noted in Chapter 1, the dens were often targets for criminal activity, which led to a loss of custom, followed, invariably, by a petition from the tax farmer for a reduction in his payments to the state. But, while the stationing of police in the dens was meant to protect against this, it created further problems. Primarily, it placed a large additional burden upon an undermanned and overstretched police force. In the late 1890s, Jardine repeatedly asked for extra men to supervise the dens.⁹ The shortage of police is also attested to by the gambling house farmers who requested more men, sometimes complaining that there were none assigned to their dens in the first place.¹⁰ Even if there was a police presence it was no guarantee against fights or extortion. In at least one case, off-duty police caused trouble and their on-duty colleagues were reluctant to intervene and make arrests.¹¹ There was also the issue of who should pay the wages of these police. With the support of Prince

⁹ NA R.5 N.8.1/142, 'Jardine to Prince Naret Worarit, 13 Dec. 1897 & 8 July 1898'; *RPAB* 1898-99, pp. 9-10. In 1898/9, the total force was 2,101 men, policing a population that Jardine estimated at 450,000.

¹⁰ NA R.5 N.42.11/16, 'Alangkan to Phetchaphani, 15 Nov. 1897'; NA R.5 N.42.11/23, 'Chin Hu to Finance Office, 26 Aug. 1899'.

¹¹ NA R.5 N.42.11/15, 'Chin Hoi to Finance Office, 4 June 1897'.

Naret Worarit, Minister of Local Government from April 1892 to December 1907, Jardine took the view that since the alcohol and opium farmers paid all the costs of employing police to monitor and protect their operations, the gambling farmers should do so as well.¹² On the other hand, Prince Mahit Rachaharithai, Minister of Finance from August 1896 to May 1906, believed that it was the government's duty to maintain law and order, and thus its responsibility to provide police for free. Of course, he was also concerned how charging the gambling farmers for the police might impact on their payments to the state.¹³ In the end, the administrative side of government seems to have triumphed over the fiscal. Lawson noted that the increase in private guards, meaning police constables contracted out for private use, in 1901/2 was partly due to the gambling farmers paying for the men in their establishments.¹⁴ Nevertheless, the Bangkok force remained shorthanded and monitoring the dens was a drain on precious resources that might have been better spent elsewhere.

Although supposedly intended to reduce the amount of gambling in Bangkok, these initial closures and stricter regulation had a limited effect. After all, while some dens remained open, people would continue to gamble in them and, as Brown suggests, these establishments enjoyed a large increase in business.¹⁵ Turning to illegal gambling, meanwhile, there was a sharp increase in people playing *thua po* outside the gambling houses. To make matters worse, the relevant authorities – the gambling farmers, district officials, and police – were turning a blind eye to infringements or even conspiring with illicit gamblers. Narathip attributed this negligence and complicity to the lack of incentive: since there were no stipulated rewards for informing on or arresting offenders, no-one was willing to come forward

¹² *RPAB 1898-99*, p. 9.

¹³ NA R.5 N.8.1/142, 'Mahit to Naret, 7 April 1898'.

¹⁴ *RPAB Year 120* [1901/2], p. 9.

¹⁵ Brown, *Ministry of Finance*, p. 23.

with information or do their duty rigorously. For the Minister of Finance, this attitude undermined the very basis of state authority and could not be allowed to continue.¹⁶ His solution was to issue a declaration prescribing heavy fines for various forms of illegal gambling and offering substantial rewards for information that led to a conviction.¹⁷

For the tax farmers, increased custom at the dens meant greater potential profits. This would have led to greater competition at the auctions and, consequently, higher bids. When combined with stricter regulation, this would then have lessened the tax farmers' margin for error, making the operation of a gambling house an increasingly risky affair.¹⁸ In the long term, this led to potential tax farmers being priced out of the market, making it more and more difficult for the Ministry of Finance to find individuals with sufficient capital to take on a gambling farm.¹⁹ Those that did manage to secure one of the monopolies, however, would have found their economic power considerably enhanced as their rivals were eliminated and the government's dependence on them magnified. Picking up on the argument in Chapter 1, it is difficult to see how these initial closures were part of an attack upon Chinese capital since they effectively strengthened the positions of the most powerful tax farmers.

Of course, the real winner was clearly the state. Although there are no figures for the revenue from the gambling house farms before 1892, it appears that the state's income was not affected adversely.²⁰ More significantly, between 1892/3 and 1896/7 when there were no further closures or significant changes to the gambling farm system, gambling house revenue rose by over a third, from 1.832 million baht to

¹⁶ NA R.5 N.11.3.K/1, 'Narathip to Chulalongkorn, 11 April 1890'.

¹⁷ *PKPS*, 12, pp. 113-15.

¹⁸ This was true of tax farming in general. See Butcher, 'Revenue Farming', p. 34.

¹⁹ Kanchana, [Government Policy], pp. 99-100.

²⁰ NA R.5 Kh.14.1.Kh/1, 'Narathip to Chulalongkorn, 15 Oct. 1891'.

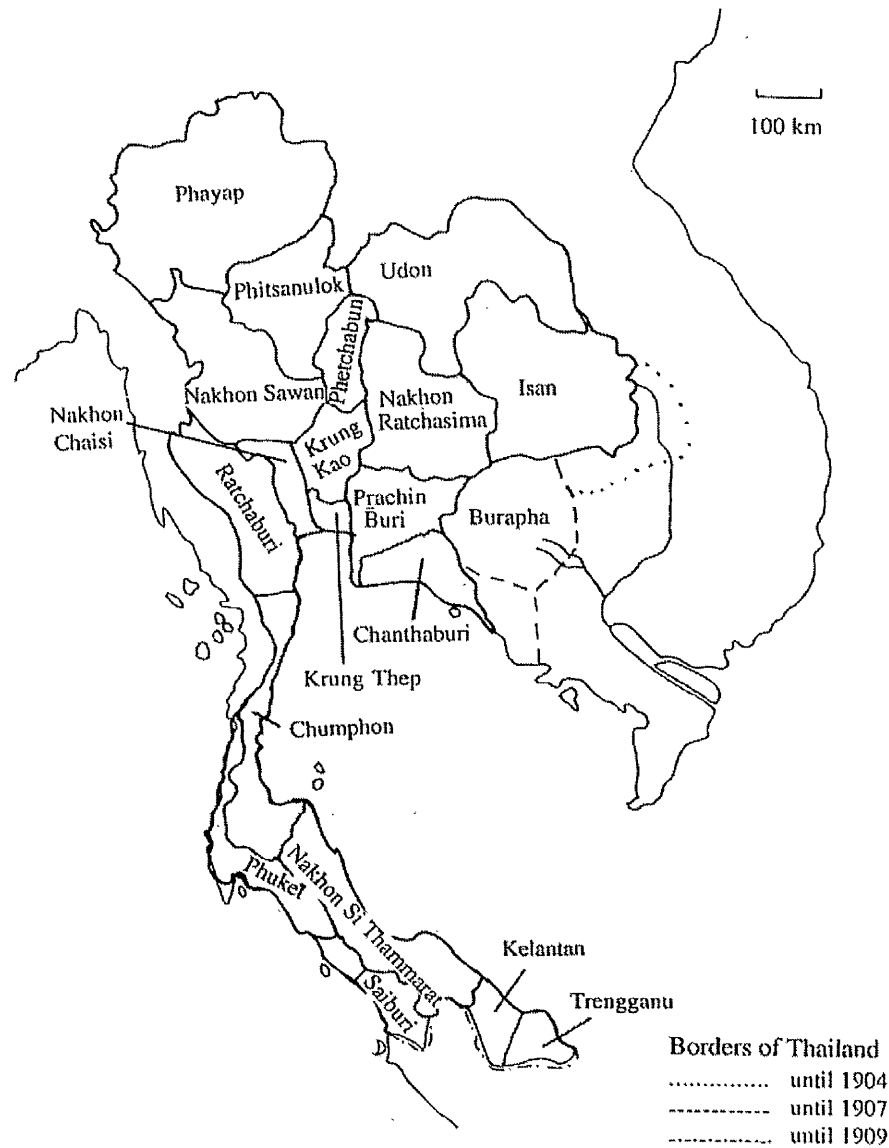
2.948 million.²¹ Rather than see this first phase of closures as a measure to restrict gambling, it is more instructive to view it as an attempt to maximise the revenue from a chaotic and unwieldy system. Closing most of the dens in Bangkok was a quick and effective way of rationalising it. The success of this policy swelled the state's income and enabled Chulalongkorn to implement crucial administrative reforms during the 1890s that secured his political hegemony and his kingdom's independence. However, as state revenue and expenditure expanded in tandem, gambling house revenue became indispensable. Finding an adequate replacement thus became the primary factor in determining the pace of further closures.

It seems that the absolute monarchy wished to implement the same policy in the provinces but this had to wait for a number of reasons. First, it lacked the administrative apparatus to put its will into practice. It was not until 1893 that Damrong began to implement the *thesaphiban* system of administration throughout the kingdom, gradually bringing the provinces under direct Bangkok control. Under this system, provinces were grouped together into administrative units called *monthon*, each of which was supervised by a Bangkok appointed commissioner (see Map 2.1 for the division of monthons in Siam in 1907/8). Second, Narathip resigned as Minister of Finance in March 1893 following allegations of embezzlement. Third, during 1893 Siam was drawn into a confrontation with France, culminating in the Paknam crisis, that threatened the continued independence of the kingdom. Although disaster was averted, this incident shook the Siamese elite to its very core. Chulalongkorn fell seriously ill and in his absence the government ceased to function effectively. Fourth, under the leadership of Prince Narit and then Prince Sirithat, the Ministry of Finance was too busy trying to establish budgetary controls over the other

²¹ Kanchana, [Government Policy], p. 150.

ministries to contemplate closing any more of the gambling houses. But, following the appointment of Prince Mahit as Minister of Finance in August 1896, the ministry was able to establish greater control over government expenditure and thoughts returned to the gambling farms.

Thai monthon, 1907/8



Drawn by Günther Moosbauer

Map 2.1: Thai monthon in 1907/8 (Source: Volker Grabowsky (ed.), *Regions and National Integration in Thailand, 1892-1992*, Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 1995, p. 3)

The second phase began in 1898 with the closure of all the gambling houses in monthons Nakhon Si Thammarat and Chumphon in the south and another 46 dens in the rest of the country.²² The remaining dens were now subject to the same bidding procedure and regulations as those in the capital.²³ Between 1899 and 1903, a further 76 establishments were closed in the provinces.²⁴ The creation of monthon Krungthep in the late 1890s, which incorporated the surrounding townships of Samut Prakan, Pathum Thani, and Nakhon Khuan Khan (Phra Pradaeng) into the administrative area of the capital, temporarily swelled the number of dens within the Bangkok area. But by 1903 the number had been reduced to 16 once more and these were mostly concentrated in the capital itself.²⁵ As with the first phase, the Minister of Finance was working on the principle that fewer gambling house farms would mean greater competition amongst the tax farmer and higher bids for the remaining monopolies. Increased auction prices would thus offset the revenue losses incurred by closure.²⁶ Indeed, this policy actually led to a substantial increase in government income. Revenue from the gambling house farms rose from 2.948 million baht in 1896/7 to 5.244 in 1900/1. Combined with the revenue from the *huai* lottery, gambling was providing the state with around one-fifth of its total income.²⁷ Yet Mahit was well aware that this balancing act could not be maintained indefinitely; sooner or later a tipping point would be reached whereby there would not be enough gambling houses, whatever their auction price, to cover the shortfall from further closures.²⁸ As a result,

²² *PKPS*, 16, pp. 288-91.

²³ Kanchana, [Government Policy], p. 125; Damrong, [Abolition], p. 47.

²⁴ For details of these closures see *PKPS*, 16, pp. 475-9; NA R.5 Kh.14.1.Kh/12, 'Mahit to Chulalongkorn, 21 Dec. 1899'; NA R.5 Kh.14.1.Kh/15, 'Mahit to Chulalongkorn, 13 Dec. 1900'; NA R.5 Kh.14.1.Kh/18, 'Mahit to Chulalongkorn, 9 Dec. 1901 & 12 Dec. 1902'.

²⁵ Damrong, [Abolition], p. 46; Kanchana, [Government Policy], p. 148.

²⁶ NA R.5 Kh.14.1.Kh/8, 'Mahit to Chulalongkorn, 11 May 1898'; NA R.5 Kh.14.1.Kh/10, 'Mahit to Chulalongkorn, 27 Nov. 1898'.

²⁷ Kanchana, [Government Policy], p. 163.

²⁸ Brown, *Ministry of Finance*, p. 89.

from 1899 onwards, he began to apply the brakes on provincial closures, which were brought to a brief halt in 1904.²⁹ With the exception of the year 1902/3, gambling house revenue remained at over 5 million baht a year during the first half of the 1900s, peaking at 6.87 million baht in 1904/5.³⁰

This policy of gradual closures was not without its reversals, however. In April 1902, an act sanctioning the re-opening of dens in monthons Nakhon Si Thammarat and Chumphon was issued.³¹ The closure of all the dens within these areas four years previously had caused problems amongst the Chinese workforce employed in the South's tin mines. Gambling was one of their few means of recreation; with this outlet removed they were reluctant to work and some moved away from the area, resulting in a labour shortage.³² To resolve this situation, tax farmers were allowed to re-establish dens exclusively for adult Chinese males in districts with a large concentration of Chinese. Presumably this meant these dens were confined to the *kongsi* mining settlements. All gaming establishments within monthon Phuket were also subject to these new restrictions. As in the past, the government promoted gambling in order to accommodate the Chinese. Nevertheless, this was only a temporary concession; the local authorities hoped that, by the time these dens were to be closed once more, the miners might have taken up some new games.³³

Commenting on this second phase of closures, Brown observes that there is little evidence it had any impact in reducing the amount of legal gambling and indeed

²⁹ In 1899 and 1900, for instance, Mahit objected to the proposed number of den closures put forward at the annual meetings of the provincial governors and ensured that a more conservative number were closed. By the latter year, he was also calling for closures to be postponed to give time to consider the best way of proceeding and find alternative revenue sources. NA R.5 Kh.14.1.Kh/12, 'Mahit to Chulalongkorn, 21 Dec. 1899'; NA R.5 Kh.14.1.Kh/15, 'Mahit to Chulalongkorn, 13 Dec. 1900'.

³⁰ Kanchana, [Government Policy], p. 150.

³¹ *PKPS*, 18, pp. 348-9.

³² NA R.5 Kh.14.1.Kh/22, 'Mahit to Chulalongkorn, 5 April 1902'; Damrong, [Abolition], p. 49; Kanchana, [Government Policy], p. 143.

³³ Damrong, [Abolition], p. 49.

suggests the high level of Chinese immigration would have meant an increase.³⁴ This requires some qualification, though. In areas such as monthon Ayutthaya where there was a high concentration of gambling houses, it seems unlikely that the level of legal gambling dropped for, as in Bangkok, people could have transferred their custom to one of the remaining dens.³⁵ But in areas such as monthon Nakhon Ratchasima where there were relatively few dens to begin with, the closure of a local gambling house would have deprived the people of an outlet for legal gambling.³⁶ These observations are based on a report in December 1903 by the governor of monthon Nakhon Si Thammarat. In the past, this region had been wracked by crime, poverty and debt slavery but following the abolition of gambling there had been a marked improvement, along with a concomitant increase in local trade. Although there had been many cases of illegal gambling around the town of Songkhla, this was considered normal in the wake of closures and was expected to diminish over time. The report went on to contrast the situation in monthon Nakhon Si Thammarat, where all the dens – except those for Chinese miners – had been closed, with that around the towns of Suphanburi and Nakhon Chaisi in the Central Plain, where gambling houses still remained.³⁷ Wherever there was a den in these latter areas, large groups of people gathered and the inhabitants of these areas lived in poverty. Even those who lived far from the towns could not escape the pull of the dens; when they came into town to sell their rice they invariably returned home penniless.³⁸ In short, the impact of this second phase of closures on legal gambling varied considerably between regions:

³⁴ Brown, *Ministry of Finance*, p. 89.

³⁵ There were still 27 dens in monthon Ayutthaya in 1904, 11 of which were in Ayutthaya province. NA R.5 Kh.14.1.Kh/18, 'Mahit to Chulalongkorn, 7 Jan. 1905 – Total remaining dens in 1904/5'.

³⁶ Pre-1898, there were just 11 dens in monthon Nakhon Ratchasima and only one remained by 1904. Ibid.

³⁷ There were five dens in Nakhon Chaisi town and three in Suphanburi. Ibid.

³⁸ This report is discussed in NA R.5 Kh.14.1.Kh/18, 'Damrong to Sommot, 13 Feb. 1904'.

gambling was restricted effectively only in those areas where all opportunity to gamble in the dens was removed.

The debate about opening hours for the gambling houses provides a good indication of the government's priorities. Under the regulations issued in the early 1890s, all establishments were supposed to close at midnight. This was widely ignored, however. When Lawson successfully prosecuted one proprietor for violating the regulations in 1902, two gambling farmers petitioned the Ministry of Finance for redress. With his eye firmly on the balance sheet, Mahit argued that the regulations were an unnecessary hindrance for the gambling farmers and did little to prevent excessive gambling.³⁹ For his part, Lawson was adamant that those dens which remained open after midnight were hangouts for 'thieves and other criminals' and that, if the closing time was enforced, there would be less crime in the city.⁴⁰ Although the Minister of Local Government shared this view, the fiscal side of the government prevailed. An amendment to the regulations was issued that enabled the Minister of Finance to issue permits for extended opening hours to meet the entertainment needs of the public.⁴¹ Nevertheless, this remained a contentious issue right up until the last dens were closed in 1917. Lawson and other officers within the Bangkok force continued to insist that the increasing levels of crime were attributable to gambling houses being open around the clock.⁴² Mahit, meanwhile, maintained that the benefits of re-imposing closing times would be outweighed by the adverse impact on gambling revenue.⁴³ In short, rising crime rates were the lesser of the two evils for the government.

³⁹ NA R.5 N.42.11/31, 'Mahit to Naret, 23 May 1902'.

⁴⁰ NA R.5 N.42.11/31, 'Lawson to Naret, 31 May 1902'.

⁴¹ *PKPS*, 18, p. 441.

⁴² NA R.5 N.8.1/306, 'Lawson to Naret, 17 Jan. 1904, 9 Feb. 1905'; NA R.6 N.4.1/51, 'Phraya Phirentharathibodi to Trotter, 29 June 1915'.

⁴³ NA R.5 N.8.1/306, 'Mahit to Naret, 31 Jan. 1905'.

As already mentioned, closures came to a halt in 1904 as the government paused to consider alternative ways of raising revenue to compensate for that lost from the proposed complete abolition of the kingdom's gambling houses. After over a year of discussions, it was decided that the shortfall from closing the provincial dens would be covered by raising the rate of land tax and the losses from abolishing the capital's establishments would be made good by a revision of the limits on the country's import duties.⁴⁴ The third and final phase of closures started in early 1905 as the government initiated an ambitious three-year plan. In 1905/6, all dens where the revenue derived was less than 50,000 baht would be closed. This included five dens in monthon Bangkok. The following year, 1906/7, all remaining provincial dens would be shut. Lastly, provided the negotiations with the treaty powers over revising import duties were successful, the capital's gambling dens would be closed in 1907/8. The government issued a notification of its plans in advance and this document is particularly revealing of its priorities. Firstly, it is very open about the importance of gambling revenue for state finances but recognises that the disadvantages outweighed the benefits. Secondly, it places great emphasis on how gambling is a barrier to economic development; the moral arguments against it are secondary:

People expend in gambling not only their own wealth but the wealth of others. They devote to gambling time during which they should be attending to their work. Under present conditions, large sums of money which come into the hands of the gambling farmers are sent out of the Kingdom. Gambling is also responsible for much of the crime that is committed. The abolition of gambling would, therefore, not only result in an improvement in the morals of the people and in increased industry, but money expended therein would remain in circulation within the country thereby adding to the wealth of the community.⁴⁵

⁴⁴ Brown, *Ministry of Finance*, pp. 89-91.

⁴⁵ NA R.5 Kh.14.1.Kh/18, 'Notification by the Minister of Finance on the Abolition of Gambling, 124'. This notification was published in the *Bangkok Times*, 23 Feb. 1905. For a Thai-language version, see *PKPS*, 19, pp. 370-4.

Thirdly, it makes no secret of the fact that the loss of revenue resulting from the first two years of closure will necessitate an increase in the rates of taxation and the introduction of new taxes. Finally, it sets a clear timetable for abolition: the last of the kingdom's gambling houses will be closed in 1907/8, though dependent on the treaty powers agreeing to a revision of custom tariffs.

In assessing the purpose of this document and the aims of the Siamese government, it is worth considering who the target audience was. Most obviously, it was directed at the population of Siam. By carefully outlining the benefits of abolition alongside the price people will have to pay, it can be seen as an appeal for understanding. The closing of the provincial dens therefore becomes both a justification and a pretext for increasing direct taxation. In other words, it is all about increasing the power of the central state and reducing its dependence on tax farming. It also gives the population ample warning of impending closure, thereby hopefully diffusing any discontent that sudden abolition might generate, among the Chinese in particular. Nevertheless, as Damrong's comments at the Council of Ministers on 14 January 1905 make clear, there was another intended audience, namely, the treaty powers.⁴⁶ In making the government's intentions so explicit, this document demonstrates to the West that the Siamese elite was determined to rid the country of gambling. Furthermore, by emphasising the potential benefits to the Siamese economy and, in turn, international trade, the government sought to use the Bangkok gambling houses as a lever to remove some of the provisions of the 'unequal' treaties and regain a degree of fiscal sovereignty. This was a win-win situation, for if the foreign powers refused then the Siamese government would be absolved of responsibility for the continued existence of the dens, and the attendant crime, while

⁴⁶ NA R.5 Kh.14.1.Kh/18, 'Report of the Council of Ministers, 14 Jan. 1905'.

still being able to enjoy the revenue they provided. In other words, the government was saying that it had done all it could to restrict gambling and the final step, the abolition of the Bangkok dens, was out of its hands. Thus, it was appearing to use its essential weakness as a bargaining chip to increase its power. The Siamese approach does seem unduly optimistic, however. As long as the foreign powers continued to benefit from low customs duties, they were unlikely to agree to a rise. It is more instructive to view the Siamese government's announcement as a symbolic act, designed to counter criticism, both at home and from overseas, about its reliance on gambling revenue.

The two-year closure of the provincial gambling houses went ahead as planned, leading to public celebrations throughout the country. These will be discussed in Chapter 5. It also attracted congratulations from some missionary organisations, with the US ambassador passing on the following message: 'In taking this step the Government is bringing itself into line with the best reforms of modern Government and is doing what is not only right in itself but what is for the largest and most permanent interest of the Siamese people.'⁴⁷ However, the Siamese government never entered formal negotiations with the treaty powers; the limit on import duties remained in place and, for the time being, so too did the Bangkok dens. As expected, gambling revenue dropped by about 3 million baht, from the high of 6.87 million in 1904/5 to 3.6 million in 1906/7, but this was easily covered by the land tax increases.⁴⁸ The government temporarily shelved the idea of an immediate end to the capital's gambling houses and reverted to gradual closures. Between 1909 and 1912, the Bangkok dens were whittled down from 11 to 5. As in the past, the revenue lost was offset by an increase in the auction price for the remaining dens. Thus, from

⁴⁷ NA R.5 Kh.14.1.Kh/18, 'Hamilton King to Devawongse, 20 April 1905'.

⁴⁸ Brown, *Ministry of Finance*, p. 91.

1906/7 until the final closures in 1917, gambling house revenue averaged around 3.3 million baht a year.⁴⁹

Closing all the provincial gambling houses had a number of effects. As Damrong observed at the meeting of provincial governors in September 1905, people would continue to gamble, legally or otherwise, and there was indeed a marked rise in requests for permits to play cards.⁵⁰ There are also indications of an increase in people playing *thua po* illegally.⁵¹ Moreover, according to contemporary English-language newspapers, Bangkok became the gambling centre of Siam, with country folk descending upon the capital every holiday period to chance their luck.⁵² It was also feared that the city would be inundated with criminals from the provinces.⁵³ Crime statistics suggest that a crime wave did subsequently engulf Bangkok: the number of criminal cases before the capital's courts rose from just under 9,000 per year in 1903/4 and 1904/5 to 10,147 in 1905/6, to 11,801 in 1906/7 and then to 14,766 in 1907/8.⁵⁴ Perhaps it is fortunate that the Bangkok dens did remain open, for as the *Bangkok Times* observed in 1910: 'the nuisance of illegal gambling would have been very much greater than it is but for the continuance of the houses in Bangkok.'⁵⁵ Prince Chanthaburi, a son of Chulalongkorn and Minister of Finance from 1908 to 1923, later claimed that the provincial closures had been successful in curbing gambling.⁵⁶ While this may have been true in the outlying regions of Siam, it seems overly optimistic for the provinces neighbouring Bangkok. People that wished to

⁴⁹ Kanchana, [Government Policy], p. 150.

⁵⁰ NA R.5 M.2.11/12, 'Report on meeting of provincial governors, 16 Sept. 1905'; NA R.5 M.2.11/11, 'Report on meeting of provincial governors, 8 Sept. 1906'.

⁵¹ NA R.5 M.2.11/11, 'Report on meeting of provincial governors, 16 Sept. 1904'.

⁵² BDM, 14 Feb. 1916; BT, 15 March 1916. See also Thompson, *Thailand*, p. 695.

⁵³ NA R.5 Kh.14.1.Kh/18, 'Report of the Council of Ministers, 15 Dec. 1904'; RPAB [1904/5], p. 10.

⁵⁴ These figures are taken from the *Ministry of Justice Report 1903-04*, p. 8; *Ministry of Justice Report 1904-05*, p. 5; *Ministry of Justice Report 1905-06*, p. 5; *Ministry of Justice Report 1906-07*, p. 14; *Ministry of Justice Report 1907-08*, p. 10.

⁵⁵ BTWM, 26 Feb. 1910.

⁵⁶ NA R.6 Kh.18/5, 'Chanthaburi to Vajiravudh, 25 Feb. 1916'.

gamble legally could, with a little effort, still do so. Lastly, increased custom in the Bangkok dens meant their auction prices soared and the shortage of tax farmers with the necessary capital became even more acute.⁵⁷ In brief, the closure of the provincial gambling houses may merely have exacerbated the problems associated with the capital's establishments and the relevant tax farms.

When the end came, it came quickly. In February 1916, Chanthaburi presented the king with a plan to abolish the *huai* lottery and the gambling houses within three years. This was to be done without the introduction of any new taxes or further attempts at renegotiating import duties but through the use of treasury reserves and economising in government expenditure.⁵⁸ Treasury reserves had been strengthened by budget surpluses totalling nearly 20 million baht for the years 1913/14 and 1914/15, and a part of these surpluses was to be used to cover the shortfall resulting from abolition.⁵⁹ Natural increases in other sources of government revenue, combined with frugality on the part of all government ministries, would then, it was hoped, help state finances return to balance within five years. Chanthaburi concluded by likening the abolition of the *huai* and the dens to one of the most celebrated acts of Chulalongkorn's reign, namely, the abolition of slavery.⁶⁰ Vajiravudh approved of the scheme; the only change he requested was that all the dens be closed in 1917/18 to coincide with the festivities celebrating the completion of his third life-cycle.⁶¹ This suggests the Siamese elite considered abolition to be, in part, a question of image and prestige. Indeed, for Chanthaburi, stopping the government's dependence on gambling revenue for its income, and the accompanying

⁵⁷ Kanchana, [Government Policy], pp. 100, 166.

⁵⁸ NA R.6 Kh.18/5, 'Chanthaburi to Vajiravudh, 25 Feb. 1916'.

⁵⁹ *RFAB 1916-17*, p. 5. The year 1916/17 also saw another surplus of over 7 million baht, further easing the state's financial situation. *RFAB 1917-18*, p. 4.

⁶⁰ NA R.6 Kh.18/5, 'Chanthaburi to Vajiravudh, 25 Feb. 1916'.

⁶¹ NA K Kh.0301.3/5, 'Vajiravudh to Chanthaburi, 10 Nov. 1916'.

criticisms, seems to have been just as important as curtailing the population's gambling addiction.⁶² On one occasion, for example, he commented that the termination of state-sponsored gambling 'placed the administrative reputation of the country on a still higher plane.'⁶³ The comparison with the abolition of slavery is particularly revealing, indicating that the Siamese elite considered the closing of the last gambling houses as a mark of the kingdom's progress, a step forward in the quest for *siwilai*. By renouncing gambling as a key component of state income, the Siamese government was showing the 'civilised' West that it was a responsible, enlightened administration. At a deeper, more subconscious level, the comparison recognises that, like the abolition of slavery, the closure of the gambling houses was part of the strategy for making Siam a more efficient and competitive producer for the world economy.

The last of Siam's gambling houses were closed in April 1917.⁶⁴ At the same time, the games of *thua po* were forbidden throughout the kingdom.⁶⁵ Yet, for all the historic significance of abolition, its impact upon the overall level of gambling in Bangkok should not be overestimated. Firstly, the winning bids for the capital's main den, that at Saphan Lek, had been falling since 1914/15, suggesting a decline in attendance.⁶⁶ Although the prices of the other four had continued to rise, the *Bangkok Times* thought the increases for 1916/17 so slight – given that the abolition of the *huai* lottery and the recent bumper rice crop would have suggested a good year for the dens – that it raised the possibility that gambling was losing its hold on the Siamese.⁶⁷

⁶² NA R.6 Kh.2/12, 'Chanthaburi to Vajiravudh, July 1917 & 30 March 1918'. The Financial Adviser, W. J. F. Williamson, also noted that the purpose of abolition was 'to purge the administration of its connection with the old-established system of State-licensed public gambling.' *RFAB 1917-18*, p. 4.

⁶³ NA K Kh.0301.3/5, 'The Abolition of Gambling (Communiqué by Ministry of Finance)'.

⁶⁴ *RFAB 1917-18*, p. 4.

⁶⁵ *PKPS*, 29, p. 327. See also NA R.6 Kh.2/9, 'Chanthaburi to Vajiravudh, 13 March 1917'.

⁶⁶ NA R.6 Kh.18/5, 'Chanthaburi to Vajiravudh, 27 March 1915 & 20 March 1916'.

⁶⁷ *BTWM*, 21 March 1916.

This seems somewhat optimistic. Chanthaburi attributed the decline in auction prices partly to the war in Europe and its impact upon the price of rice; people had less money and were thus gambling less.⁶⁸ Nevertheless, these observations do suggest another explanation: that the popularity of the gambling house and the games played therein was waning as people turned to other games of chance. The government had announced its intention of closing all the dens over ten years earlier and the people of Bangkok had had plenty of time to accustom themselves to the fact that the dens' days were numbered. Secondly, one might have expected a sharp increase in the number of people convicted of illegal gambling in the wake of closure. But this was not the case in Bangkok. Before abolition, the number of people convicted rose from 534 in 1913/14 to 1,030 the following year and to 1,664 in 1915/16.⁶⁹ After the abolition of the *huai* in April 1916 and the last dens in April 1917, the number fell to 1,489 in 1917/18 and 1,089 in 1918/19.⁷⁰ Over the next three years (1919/20 to 1921/2), the number of people convicted stabilised at around 1,500 a year.⁷¹

As in the provinces, the new craze was cards. A year after the last closures, Chanthaburi estimated that three times as many people in the capital had asked for card permits in 1917/18 as in 1916/17, leading him to conclude that the Siamese were still obsessed with gambling.⁷² Rather than reduce the level of gambling within the kingdom, the government's policy of closing the gambling houses merely channelled people's desire to gamble into other forms that remained legal or forced them to gamble illegally.

⁶⁸ NA R.6 Kh.18/5, 'Chanthaburi to Vajiravudh, 27 March 1915'.

⁶⁹ *SY 1917*, pp. 200-1.

⁷⁰ *SY 1920*, pp. 220-1.

⁷¹ *Ibid*; *SY 1924-25*, pp. 250-1.

⁷² NA R.6 Kh.2/12, 'Chanthaburi to Vajiravudh, 30 March 1918'.

Abolition of the *huai* Lottery

The guiding principle of the government's policy on the *huai* lottery was simply to keep it profitable for the tax farmer, thereby ensuring a steady stream of state revenue. As with the gambling houses, whenever the avowed aim of restricting gambling conflicted with the state's financial imperatives, the latter won out. Lottery revenue rose steadily throughout this period, from just under 1 million baht a year in the early 1890s to well over 3 million during the 1910s.⁷³ There were a number of factors behind this increase. First, as the administrative area of the capital expanded, so did the area covered by the lottery farm. By 1904, the tax farmer had established operations in most of the townships that comprised monthon Krungthep.⁷⁴ Second, the extension of the rail network into the provinces adjoining Bangkok enabled people from outlying districts to come into the capital occasionally and place a stake on the *huai*.⁷⁵ Third, the lottery farm profited from the closure of the provincial gambling houses as people sought different and still legal ways of trying their luck. Lastly, lottery revenue tended to reflect the population's wealth. As the Financial Advisers observed on a couple of occasions, a good rice crop meant greater indulgence in gambling, larger profits for the tax farmer and more revenue for the state.⁷⁶ The steady year-on-year growth can thus be seen, as it was by the *Bangkok Times*, as an indication of increasing prosperity.⁷⁷ Nevertheless, the government was required to take some steps to safeguard the tax farmer's monopoly and lottery revenue.

⁷³ Kanchana, [Government Policy], p. 163. Lottery revenue peaked at 3.62 million baht in 1912/13.

⁷⁴ During the nineteenth century, the *huai* was limited to Bangkok, Nonthaburi and Pathum Thani. From the start of the twentieth century, it was extended into the towns of Nakhon Khuan Khan (Phra Pradaeng), Samut Prakan, Minburi and Thanyaburi. NA R.5 Kh.14.1.Kh/19, 'Mahit to Chulalongkorn, 27 March 1902 & 24 March 1903'; Kanchana, [Government Policy], pp. 47, 168.

⁷⁵ RFAB 1902-03, p. 4.

⁷⁶ Ibid.; RFAB 1904-05, p. 7.

⁷⁷ BTWM, 21 March 1916.

The most serious problem for the tax farmer was fraud, and this commonly took the form of either the inner district managers or the lottery clerks engaging in *kin phoi*, which literally means 'eating the accounts'. Instead of submitting people's stakes and records of them to the central lottery house, a manager or clerk would hold onto the money. When someone won, they would pay out the winnings from their own pocket; the loser's stake would, naturally, remain there. By the start of the twentieth century, this practice was seriously affecting the lottery farmer's profits. The problem was compounded by the fact that the farmer had recently been stripped of his power to arrest, fine and imprison employees, thereby removing the threat of punishment by the farmer himself. Moreover, even when the farmer was, with the assistance of the police, able to bring charges against fraudulent employees, the courts were unable to punish them heavily because existing gambling legislation did not cover *kin phoi*.⁷⁸ A law covering offences of this sort was thus issued in January 1901; the penalty being a fine not exceeding 400 baht, a maximum prison sentence of six months or both.⁷⁹

Although the extension of the rail network into the provinces around Bangkok broadened the *huai*'s customer base, it had some drawbacks. Just as easily as the train could carry people into Bangkok to place a stake, it could carry news of the winning letter back to the provinces. People, mostly Chinese, were quick to take advantage of this, setting themselves up as unofficial lottery clerks in order to receive bets. Sometimes they worked illicitly for the district managers of the outlying areas. This not only opposed government attempts to restrict gambling but also affected lottery revenue as provincial people no longer had to travel to the capital to place a stake on the *huai*. In early 1902, Damrong therefore suggested that since it was impossible to

⁷⁸ NA R.5 Kh.14.1.Kh/4, 'Mahit to Chulalongkorn, 11 Jan. 1901'.

⁷⁹ PKPS, 17, pp. 536-7.

suppress these underground clerks, the lottery farmer should be allowed to extend his operations into four neighbouring monthons: Ayutthaya, Nakhon Ratchasima, Nakhon Chaisi and Ratchaburi. In return, the government could expect a healthy increase in the amount the tax farmer paid for the monopoly.⁸⁰ After lengthy discussions, it was decided to limit the extension to those districts through which railway lines passed. Starting in the year 1903/4, lottery operations were established in 11 sub-districts (*tambon*): four in Ayutthaya province, two in Saraburi, and five in Nakhon Chaisi.⁸¹ This was hardly the act of a government committed to restricting gambling.

The extension lasted only a year, however. Chin Tai Chin, the lottery farmer, was unhappy with restrictions on where he could set up lottery stands, which limited his potential profits.⁸² More importantly, local people had taken to the *huai* with a passion, with many running up debts, and it was feared this would lead to still greater poverty and crime.⁸³ Underground lottery operations could not be curtailed so easily, though. A year after the extension had been terminated, the new lottery farmer complained to the Ministry of Finance about the existence of unauthorised clerks receiving stakes clandestinely once more. Takings on the *huai* had fallen as a result.⁸⁴ Although the government had not created this problem, it may have inadvertently made it worse.

The Siamese government tried a different approach to resolve the situation. In April 1905, a law was passed that prohibited all *huai* operations outside monthon Krungthep. Offenders were to be punished under the earlier 1901 act. Furthermore,

⁸⁰ NA R.5 Kh.14.1.Kh/19, 'Mahit to Chulalongkorn, 29 April 1902 & 5 March 1903'. Mahit predicted an increase of 3,000 chang (240,000 baht) at least.

⁸¹ NA R.5 Kh.14.1.Kh/19, 'Mahit to Chulalongkorn, 29 May 1903'.

⁸² Ibid.

⁸³ NA R.5 Kh.14.1.Kh/19, 'Phraya Si Sahathep to Ministry of Finance, 19 Jan. 1904'.

⁸⁴ NA R.5 Kh.14.1.Kh/19, 'Mahit to Chulalongkorn, 26 March 1905'.

both the lottery farmer and public prosecutors were given investigative powers and the right to bring charges against suspects.⁸⁵ This was necessary to prevent the farmer from using his associates or own employees to receive stakes in districts outside his jurisdiction.⁸⁶ In other words, the government had recognised that the lottery farmer was part of the illegal gambling problem. Despite these measures, underground *huai* operations continued to thrive, even spreading to other regions through which railway lines passed such as monthon Prachinburi. In March 1910, Chanthaburi wrote to Chulalongkorn commenting on the inadequacy of the existing legislation, specifically the fact that the penalties were relatively light and did not act as a sufficient deterrent.⁸⁷ The 1905 law was subsequently replaced with a new one that not only detailed heavier penalties for illicit clerks – fines were increased to between 500 and 4,000 baht with prison sentences ranging from six months to two years – but also made it an offence to place a stake with these people.⁸⁸ Obviously, this provision had little to do with the ‘immorality’ of gambling since betting on the *huai* was legal in Bangkok. It was only a crime when the lottery farmer and, by extension, the government did not receive their share of the proceeds. As with other types of gambling, lottery legislation arose out of the need to protect the tax farmer’s profits and state revenue.

But even this law was not enough to curb the popularity of the underground *huai* in the provinces, and successive lottery farmers continued to complain of its impact on their profits right until the lottery’s final years.⁸⁹ Indeed, so great was the problem that there were further suggestions of extending the *huai* into the provinces,

⁸⁵ PKPS, 20, pp. 26-8.

⁸⁶ NA R.5 Kh.14.1.Kh/19, ‘Report of Council of Ministers, 30 March 1905’.

⁸⁷ NA R.5 M.1.3/20, ‘Chanthaburi to Chulalongkorn, 10 March 1910’.

⁸⁸ PKPS, 23, pp. 237-8.

⁸⁹ NA R.6 Kh.18/5, ‘Chanthaburi to Vajiravudh, 27 March 1915’.

and the government even considered administering the entire operation itself.⁹⁰ Just months before the lottery was abolished, the *Bangkok Daily Mail* came out in favour of the former proposal. It argued that the increase in lottery revenue resulting from such an extension would offset the losses from closing the last of the gambling houses. It might also help to put more cash into circulation and 'prevent the people from wasting their time and money in coming to the capital to gamble.'⁹¹ This underlines how the government had no definite timetable for abolishing the *huai*. As the situation got increasingly out of hand, the government was forced to do something sooner rather than later. When the opportunity did eventually arise, the government was quick to seize it.

The state's inability to deal with illegal gambling on the *huai* was clearly a key factor in its abolition but there was another: the economic power of the Chinese community, their growing sense of identity and the rise of Chinese nationalism, and the threat this presented.⁹² In June 1910, Bangkok was plunged into chaos when Chinese workers went on a mass strike in protest against their increased tax burden following the imposition of the annual capitation tax. The strike was organised by the secret societies and its failure left this traditional community leadership discredited. It also left a marked impression upon Vajiravudh, who came to the throne in October that year, and later wrote an anti-Chinese tract entitled *The Jews of the East*.⁹³ Unsurprisingly, these sentiments had a direct bearing on the government's attitude towards the Chinese plutocrats that dominated the tax farming system. Kanchana highlights how government investigations revealed that Chin Hong, holder of

⁹⁰ Kanchana, [Government Policy], p. 151.

⁹¹ *BDM*, 14 Feb. 1916.

⁹² Inspired by events in China, the first decade of the twentieth century saw the establishment of Chinese newspapers and schools in Bangkok, an increase in Chinese political activity in the kingdom, and a strengthening of ties with the homeland by overseas Chinese. See Skinner, *Chinese Society*, pp. 155-9.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, pp. 162-5.

multiple tax farms including the *huai* and one of the gambling houses, had been a key force behind the strike. However, the government did not have enough evidence to convict him in court and therefore tried to force him to return to China by barring him from taking on any tax farms and forcing him to pay up all his outstanding debts.⁹⁴ From then on, Vajiravudh tried to prevent any Chinese from becoming a tax farmer. In the case of the *huai*, this policy was bound to fail for there were few individuals who were not Chinese that had the resources and personnel to administer the farm. One Phra Aphaiwanit, presumably a Thai, offered to take it on for the year 1912/13 but submitted a lower bid than Chin Hoi, a member of the Chin Hong cartel. But, instead of giving the farm to Chin Hoi, Chanthaburi allowed Phra Aphaiwanit to increase his bid and he duly received the monopoly. Unfortunately for the government, he was unable to make his payments and the lottery farm reverted to Chin Hong in 1913/14.⁹⁵ It was he who then suggested extending the *huai* into the provinces once more to counter the underground lottery. As it was, another Chinese tax farmer received the lottery monopoly for the year 1915/16. According to Kanchana, it was this inability to find non-Chinese tax farmers that forced the government's hand.⁹⁶ The *huai* lottery farm was abolished on 1 April 1916 and the *huai* itself totally prohibited throughout the kingdom, with heavy penalties for violations.⁹⁷ This latter act was significant because it precluded the government or private organisations from setting up their own *huai* operations. In other words, abolition was due not just to problems with the tax farming system and its dominance by the Chinese; as with the games of *thua po*, the Siamese elite found something undesirable in the nature of the *huai* lottery itself.

⁹⁴ Kanchana, [Government Policy], pp. 151-2.

⁹⁵ Ibid., p. 152.

⁹⁶ Ibid., p. 153.

⁹⁷ *PKPS*, 28, pp. 472-3.

Gambling Legislation

Terminating the kingdom's gambling house farms and the *huai* lottery farm was just one aspect of the absolute monarchy's policy for restricting gambling. As mentioned in Chapter 1, new gambling games were continually coming into fashion as the kingdom's links with the wider world deepened. Moreover, once closure of the dens got underway in the 1880s, people began to turn to other games as replacements for *thua po*. Playing cards became especially popular. In 1894, for instance, then Minister of Finance, Narit, commented on the boom in *phai pok* dens in the capital and raised the spectre of a corrupted youth stealing from their families and friends to feed their gambling habit.⁹⁸ These developments necessitated legislation designed to regulate legal gambling and penalise illegal gambling. During the Fifth Reign, two principal laws, supplemented by a myriad of amendments, were introduced and these formed the legislative basis for the control of gambling until 1930. Under these laws, numerous games were forbidden and others permitted subject to license, at first from the gambling house farmer and later from the state. This section will examine the provisions of these laws, the penalties they prescribed for illegal gambling, and their impact. It will also analyse the factors that determined the legal status of particular games.

The first of these laws was the Gambling Revenue Act R. S. 111, which was enacted throughout the kingdom in April 1893 and annulled all previous gambling legislation.⁹⁹ In terms of its format and purpose, it can be considered Siam's first 'modern' gambling law. In contrast to previous legislation that was issued on an ad hoc basis, it was an attempt to lay down one comprehensive system to cover every aspect of gambling and its administration, and it collected together all extant

⁹⁸ NA R.5 Kh.14.1.Kh/4, 'Narit to Sommot, 23 Jan. 1894'.

⁹⁹ For the complete act, see *PKPS*, 13, pp. 250-8.

provisions and regulations. Gambling games were divided into four broad groups: first were those totally prohibited; second, the *huai* lottery; third, all those games played exclusively in the gambling houses; and fourth, games that could be played anywhere with license from the gambling house farmer. The prohibited list included *huai chap yiki* (the twelve letter lottery), *mai sam an* (three-stick trick), and making turtles race by lighting fires on their backs. While the second of these was a trick designed to part the foolish from their cash and the last was obviously banned on grounds of cruelty to animals, the reason why *huai chap yiki* was forbidden is less clear. This will be considered later. As for games permitted subject to license, the act listed eleven broad types – various card and board games, animal fights and races, amongst others – and the corresponding fees to be paid to the tax farmer. Any game that was not listed could be played freely.

One area that saw a fundamental change was penalties. Marking a clear break from the past, whipping was no longer a punishment for illegal gambling.¹⁰⁰ Penalties now consisted of fines, with a clear differential in their severity depending on the legal status of the game. For instance, the fine for playing a prohibited game was 2,000 baht compared with 200 baht for playing a permitted game without license. This suggests that the crime lay not so much in gambling itself but rather in the nature of specific games. In all cases, half of the fine was payable to the plaintiff, presumably the tax farmer, and the other to the state. If the fine could not be paid, the guilty party was subject to imprisonment with hard labour on a sliding scale of from two months for a fine of 100 baht to two years for 8,000 baht.¹⁰¹ That imprisonment was only an option in lieu of a fine might suggest the government considered gambling a financial crime first and foremost. It is more likely, though, that this was a

¹⁰⁰ Under the 1891 regulations for the Bangkok dens, 30 lashes was a potential penalty for playing some banned games. *PKPS*, 13, p. 55.

¹⁰¹ *PKPS*, 13, pp. 254-5.

practical measure born of the fact that the state did not have enough prison space to incarcerate hordes of gambling offenders. How the courts actually punished gambling offenders will be considered in Chapter 4.

The second of the laws marked a major progression in government policy. Damrong's reforms of the provincial administration during the 1890s had enabled Bangkok to establish an unprecedented amount of control over many of Siam's outlying regions and tributary states. The Siamese state had now acquired enough administrative penetration for it to collect revenue by itself and was no longer totally dependent upon the tax farmers. In March 1902, Damrong wrote to Chulalongkorn outlining the main provisions of the new law he had had drafted. The previous year, the right to issue licenses and collect fees for gambling games conducted outside the dens – those in the fourth group of the 1893 law – had been removed from the gambling house farmers for Bangkok and sold as a separate 'betting' farm, with a substantial increase in revenue.¹⁰² The Ministry of Finance now wished to implement a similar scheme in the provinces but with the government taking the place of the tax farmer. Furthermore, Damrong had reviewed the 1893 law and found it to be ambiguous, deficient and inadequate for the day and age. It specified games that were no longer played and activities, such as horse-racing, that he thought inappropriate to tax. Recognising that games and methods of gambling varied from region to region, there were separate regulations for the inner monthons, constituting the core of the country, and for monthon Phayap, which consisted of the northern provinces centred on Chiang Mai.¹⁰³

Under the Gambling Revenue Act R. S. 120, promulgated in March 1902, the government thus assumed control of the licensing of gambling games, apart from the

¹⁰² The betting farm fetched a price of 103,040 baht. *RFAB 1901-02*, p. 3.

¹⁰³ NA R.5 M.1.3/20, 'Damrong to Chulalongkorn, 19 March 1902'.

huai and those played in the dens.¹⁰⁴ The Ministers of the Interior and Local Government were charged with administering the act and given the power to enact the necessary regulations for those areas under their jurisdiction.¹⁰⁵ This shift in responsibility for gambling from the Ministry of Finance to these two administrative ministries was primarily a practical measure. Mahit had long sought to divest the Ministry of Finance of the duty of collecting revenue so that it might focus on controlling state expenditure. In the late 1890s, first the Bangkok Revenue Department and then its provincial equivalent had been set up within the ministries of Local Government and the Interior respectively for this purpose.¹⁰⁶ It was these two departments that were to administer the licensing of gambling. Furthermore, the Ministry of the Interior under Damrong was the vanguard of the central state's administrative push into the provinces and, since it was often the first ministry with personnel on the ground, it often assumed the duties of other ministries. Nevertheless, the transfer of responsibility also implies a shift in the state's perception of gambling from being primarily a financial issue to a social one.

In contrast to the 1893 law, the 1902 one made no distinction in terms of penalties for different types of offences. The penalty for playing forbidden games was the same as that for playing permitted games without a license: a fine not exceeding 200 baht or imprisonment for up to 6 months or both.¹⁰⁷ Most likely, the Siamese lawmakers considered this a more realistic and appropriate tariff for gambling offences. An alternative interpretation, however, is that the two offences were now considered equivalent in terms of criminality: depriving the state of its due income by

¹⁰⁴ In those areas where there were no gambling house farms, the games of *thua po* also came under the act.

¹⁰⁵ For the complete act, see *PKPS*, 18, pp. 275-9.

¹⁰⁶ Brown, *Ministry of Finance*, pp. 62-5.

¹⁰⁷ *PKPS*, 18, p. 278.

playing certain games without license was as serious as playing a game forbidden, presumably, on moral grounds.

Turning to the ministerial regulations, there were few significant differences between those for the inner monthons and those for monthon Phayap.¹⁰⁸ Both worked on the same principles, listing those games that were forbidden and those that were permitted subject to license. Prohibited games consisted of three broad categories: first, games that were calculated to deceive the players, including three-stick trick and its card equivalent; second, games in which the chances were disproportionately in favour of the banker, such as *huai chap yiki*; and third, games which entailed cruelty to animals, such as cockfighting with spurs. Permitted games were divided into three classes. Class 1 covered games that involved a large congregation of people, such as bullfighting and fish-fighting, and these could only be played in certain licensed venues. Class 2 might be termed 'fairground games' since it included activities such as target shooting, throwing rings over prizes, and raffles. These could be played only, with a permit, during important festivals and other special occasions. Lastly, Class 3 games could be played anywhere and at any time once a permit had been obtained; this included all card games and some dice, board and domino ones. Moreover, keeping with tradition, they could be played without license during the Chinese New Year, Siamese New Year and Songkran periods.

The new law and attendant regulations came into force in the inner monthons and monthon Phayap on 1 April 1902.¹⁰⁹ Financially, its impact was immediate. In

¹⁰⁸ For both sets of regulations, see *PKPS*, 18, pp. 264-9, 269-74. In a concession to the traditional northern elite, the state council on which they sat (*khao sanam luang*) was granted some regulatory powers.

¹⁰⁹ *PKPS*, 18, pp. 339-40, 346-7. The actual areas covered by the act were 1) monthon Krung Kao (Ayutthaya), 2) monthon Phitsanulok, 3) monthon Nakhon Sawan, 4) monthon Prachinburi, 5) monthon Nakhon Ratchasima, 6) monthon Phetchabun, 7) monthon Phayap, 8) monthon Nakhon Chaisi, 9) monthon Ratchaburi, 10) monthon Chumphon, 11) monthon Nakhon Si Thammarat except for the seven Malay sultanates in the far south, 12) muang Chanthaburi, 13) muang Trat, 14) muang Rayong, and 15) muang Prachantakhirikhet.

the budget, Mahit had estimated that the sale of gaming licenses might amount to 200,000 baht; the actual figure for the first year was 458,626 baht.¹¹⁰ This success, however, was tempered by fears about the viability of the Bangkok betting farm. Mahit expected its price for the year 1903/4 to drop by as much as 800 chang (64,000 baht) because of the lack of tax farmers willing to place competitive bids after the incumbent farmer had already called for a reduction in his payments. The Minister of Finance thus wished the 1902 law to be implemented in Bangkok immediately.¹¹¹ However, Naret, the minister responsible for the capital, expressed some doubts as to the wisdom of this move. Citing the fact that the revenue from the sale of licenses in the provinces had exceeded all expectations, he asserted that the new law had made it easier for people to gamble and would have the same effect in Bangkok. Revenue had increased only because people were gambling more, a situation that would inevitably lead to greater poverty. Indeed, whatever the amount of revenue collected, the population would waste much more on gambling. Viewed from this perspective, Naret believed the 1902 law should be abolished. However, he was a realist and recognised that the people of Bangkok would continue to gamble regardless. It was better therefore that the profits of gambling should fall to the state rather than the tax farmers.¹¹² In short, his internal debate boiled down to the question of which was the greater evil: a loss of state income or an increase in popular gaming. And, in what was becoming a familiar pattern, the moral and economic arguments against gambling lost out to the financial requirements of the Siamese state.

The 1902 law and specific ministerial regulations for Bangkok came into force in the capital on 1 April 1903.¹¹³ In principle, these regulations were essentially

¹¹⁰ Kanchana, [Government Policy], p. 133.

¹¹¹ NA R.5 N.2/95, 'Naret to Chulalongkorn, 7 Feb. 1903'.

¹¹² Ibid.

¹¹³ *PKPS*, 18, p. 547. For the complete Bangkok regulations, see *ibid.* pp. 548-53.

the same as those for the provinces; the only significant difference lay in the legality of certain games. For instance, *to tem*, played with dominoes, was a Class 3 permitted game in both the inner monthons and monthon Phayap but was forbidden in Bangkok on the grounds that it consumed money quickly and frequently led to quarrels. Conversely, *mai mun*, a game similar to roulette, was prohibited in the provinces but was placed in Class 2 for the capital on the basis that it tended to be played only during festivals, did not involve much money, and was usually played for prizes.¹¹⁴ Clearly, some games were prohibited for moral reasons, most obviously those that were banned under all three sets of regulations, but the fact that other games might be illegal in one region but permitted in another implies there were other considerations at work. The clearest statement of one principle for determining the legal status of games came up in a discussion in 1917 on a proposed new gambling law to deal with the anticipated boom in other forms of gaming following abolition: 'it is not until a particular game is too frequently played, or proves injurious to morals or public security, that it should be dealt with by law, either in the way of imposing the restriction of a license, or by forbidding the game altogether.'¹¹⁵ In other words, the legality of a game was partially determined by its popularity; when the playing of it reached epidemic levels, the government would take action.

A good illustration of this point is the series of acts forbidding *bia bok*. Originally, this game was not covered by any legislation and was especially popular in the Northeast. It was played with four cowries that were placed in a bamboo

¹¹⁴ NA R.5 N.2/95, 'Naret to Chulalongkorn, 7 Feb. 1903'.

¹¹⁵ NA K Kh.0301.1.3/7, 'Memorandum of a discussion, on 5th March 1917, between H. R. H. the Minister of Finance, the Financial Adviser, and the Legal Adviser to the Ministry, on Phya Indra Montri's proposed new Gaming Law'.

cylinder and then shaken on to the floor (see Figure 2.1). Bets were placed on whether the number of cowries lying face up was going to be odd or even.¹¹⁶

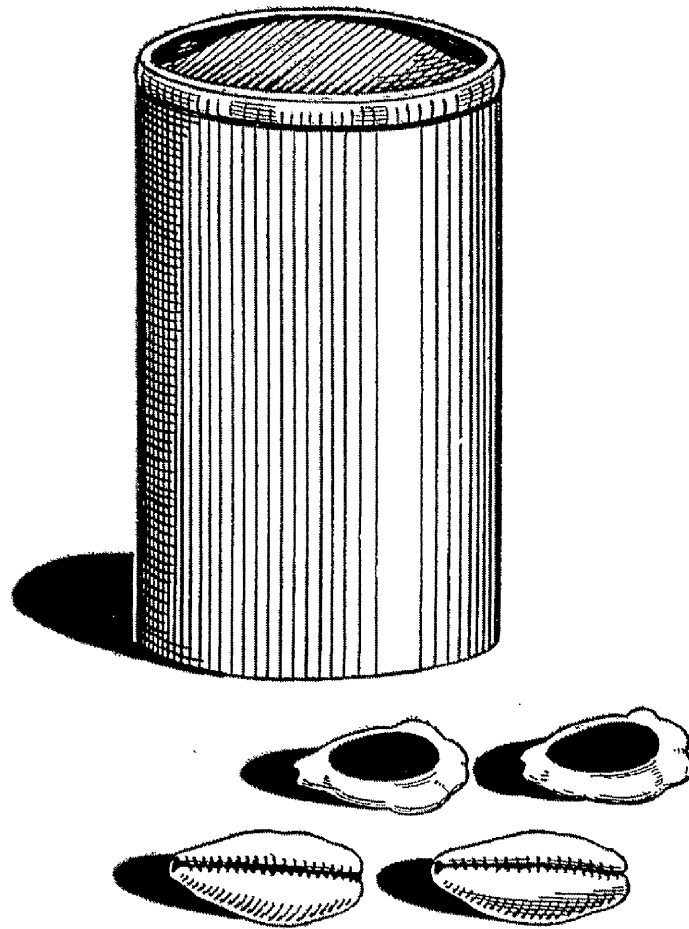


Figure 2.1: Equipment for playing *bia bok* (Source: Phakdi, *Khambanyai*)

In late 1902, the commissioner of monthon Nakhon Ratchasima, the administrative centre of the Northeast, expressed concern about the proliferation of *bia bok* dens in the towns of Chaiyaphum and Buriram. Invoking the familiar mantra of crime and poverty, he described how people had become so absorbed in the game they were no

¹¹⁶ Lisut, [Gambling Handbook], pp. 106-7.

longer interested in making an honest living, with many resorting to banditry.¹¹⁷ *Bia bok* was promptly prohibited in that monthon and a couple of months later in monthon Phetchabun as well.¹¹⁸ Two years later, it had reared its head in the vicinity of the capital, brought by migrant Lao farmhands from the northeast.¹¹⁹ *Bia bok* was quickly banned within monthon Krungthep.¹²⁰ Similarly, as a result of increasing inter-provincial trade between monthons Nakhon Ratchasima and Phetchabun and adjacent provinces, *bia bok* was being transmitted from place to place by peddlers and itinerant workers. The only solution was to ban it throughout the inner monthons.¹²¹ This example clearly shows how government policy tended to be reactive; steps to limit the playing of *bia bok* were taken only once the game had become a problem in specific areas. It also highlights how the increasing economic integration of the provinces with the capital, facilitated by the expanding rail network, encouraged the spread of new games.

The gambling tax farmers also exerted an influence in determining the legality of some games. In April 1903, for instance, the holders of the gambling house farms for five Bangkok districts complained to the Minister of Finance about the widespread playing of *si ngao lak*, a dice game included in Class 3 of all the different regulations, in the capital. The game was very popular among both the Siamese and the Chinese and they estimated that at least 200 permits for it were being issued daily. Custom in their five gambling houses had fallen and they predicted that state income would suffer unless something was done to limit the game.¹²² Nevertheless, rather than forbid *si ngao lak*, Naret thought reclassifying it as a Class 2 game, meaning it

¹¹⁷ NA R.5 M.1.3/20, 'Damrong to Chulalongkorn, 11 Sept. 1902'.

¹¹⁸ PKPS, 18, pp. 458-9; NA R.5 M.1.3/20, 'Chulalongkorn to Damrong, 10 Nov. 1902'.

¹¹⁹ NA R.5 M.1.3/20, 'Naret to Chulalongkorn, 10 Aug. 1904'.

¹²⁰ PKPS, 19, p. 244.

¹²¹ NA R.5 M.1.3/20, 'Damrong to Chulalongkorn, 5 Oct. 1904'; 'Act prohibiting *bia bok* in various monthons'.

¹²² NA R.5 N.2/95, 'Nai Ki and Chin Khai Ho to Mahit, 20 April 1904'.

could be played only on special occasions, would be sufficient to protect the revenue.¹²³ An added bonus was that the state would also continue to profit from the sale of permits, indicating why the Siamese government preferred regulation to prohibition. Over the rest of the decade, these processes of prohibition and reclassification were repeated with a number of other games.¹²⁴

The 1902 law had a number of effects. Most obviously, it opened up a new revenue source for the state. During the first decade of its enactment, income from license fees was usually around 550,000 baht a year, rising to a high of 770,373 baht in the year 1906/7 when all the provincial gambling houses were closed.¹²⁵ While this was less than a tenth of the revenue the gambling house and lottery farms were bringing in, it did help offset the losses resulting from closures. Furthermore, both Damrong and Naret believed that since the issuing of gambling licenses had been transferred to the Revenue Departments, it had become easier for people to gamble.¹²⁶ Indeed, in those areas where the government had terminated all the gambling house farms before the 1902 law was enacted, the local people had been temporarily deprived of any facilities for legal gambling. In other words, this law was designed to facilitate the state's exploitation of the population's gambling habit for revenue purposes rather than to restrict gambling. Finally, it also created new opportunities for corruption and fraud amongst those government officials responsible for administering and issuing licenses. In 1914, for instance, police investigations into why some people in Phra Khanong district just south of Bangkok had been playing

¹²³ NA R.5 N.2/95, 'Naret to Chulalongkorn, 4 May 1903'; *PKPS*, 19, pp. 11-12. The game was similarly reclassified in the inner monthon regulations as well. *PKPS*, 19, p. 21.

¹²⁴ The game of *i-chong*, for instance, was first forbidden in monthon Phayap in 1906 and then in all other parts of the country where the 1902 law was in force in 1909. NA R.5 M.1.3/20, 'Damrong to Chulalongkorn, 18 April 1906, 26 Oct. 1909'; *PKPS*, 21, pp. 17-18; *PKPS*, 23, pp. 172-3.

¹²⁵ *SY 1931-33*, p. 295.

¹²⁶ NA R.5 Kh.14.1.Kh/18, 'Damrong to Chulalongkorn, 4 Aug. 1903'; NA R.5 N.2/95, 'Naret to Chulalongkorn, 7 Feb. 1903'.

cards without a license revealed that the district chief had been issuing handwritten letters as 'special' permits. This official claimed he had done this because he had run out of proper permits and that he had faithfully recorded all the fees collected in the accounts book. It later emerged, however, that he had been pocketing the cash from the sale of these 'special' permits.¹²⁷ Similarly, licensing officials were sometimes accused of demanding extra cash before granting gambling permits, though this was not always proved.¹²⁸ There were also frequent complaints of corruption and other injustices in the licensing system.¹²⁹

As the administrative and territorial integration of areas on the kingdom's peripheries progressed, the 1902 law was gradually enacted in these places. In the south, the seven Malay sultanates came under its jurisdiction in June 1902 and monthon Phuket in October 1904.¹³⁰ The last areas to be covered were those on the kingdom's eastern flank bordering French Indochina: monthon Burapha, consisting of the towns of Siem Reap, Sisophon and Phnom Sok in what is now Cambodia in 1906;¹³¹ the semi-autonomous province of Nan and monthon Udon in 1907;¹³² and, finally, monthon Isan in 1909.¹³³ In both Nan and Udon, the law was enacted in order to help alleviate outbreaks of banditry resulting, supposedly, from unregulated gambling.¹³⁴ The Siamese government no doubt feared that this banditry might destabilise these sensitive border regions and provoke intervention by France. This certainly seems to have been the logic behind the decision to prohibit all forms of

¹²⁷ NA R.6 N.11.5.Ch/1, 'Luang Wichan to Phraya Ratsadakonkoson, 25 Feb. 1914'.

¹²⁸ NA R.6 N.42/92, 'People of amphoe Bang Loeng to Lord Mayor of Bangkok, 16 April 1925'; NA MT.0201.1.1/125, 'Undersecretary of the Interior to Provincial Committee for Phra Nakhon and Thonburi, 16 March 1937'; NA MT.0201.1.1/835, 'Provincial Committee for Phitsanulok to Undersecretary of the Interior, 30 July 1938'.

¹²⁹ See for instance NA R.6 N.42/26, 'The Oppressed to Yomarat, 20 Sept. 1915'; NA MT.0201.1.1/1549, 'Nai Kang to Luang Phibun Songkhram, 5 April 1940'.

¹³⁰ *PKPS*, 18, p. 431; *PKPS*, 19, pp. 288-9.

¹³¹ *PKPS*, 21, pp. 15-16. The following year these provinces were ceded to France.

¹³² *PKPS*, 21, pp. 120-1, 166-7.

¹³³ *PKPS*, 23, pp. 13-14.

¹³⁴ NA R.5 Kh.14.1.Kh/20, 'Damrong to Chulalongkorn, 5 June 1906'.

gambling in the district of Mae Sot, Trat province, which bordered British Burma.¹³⁵ The implementation of the 1902 law throughout the kingdom was, therefore, not just a reflection of administrative integration and centralisation, it was also a mechanism for reinforcing it, maintaining internal security, and defending the kingdom's sovereignty. In this sense, the regulation and restriction of gambling was part of the process whereby the 'geo-body' of modern day Thailand came into focus.¹³⁶

The Siamese government was realistic as to how far it might restrict people from gambling; it was fully aware that closing the gambling houses would only force gamblers to seek their thrills elsewhere. As Damrong observed in a letter to the king in March 1906, 'gambling is similar to opium addiction. Forcing people to stop it at once is more difficult than getting them to reduce it gradually.'¹³⁷ On the eve of the closure of all the provincial gambling houses, the government took a number of pre-emptive measures to tighten the existing legislation and forestall the anticipated boom in other forms of gambling. First, the penalties for illegal gambling under the 1902 law were increased: the fine for playing a permitted game without license rose from 200 baht to 1,000 and that for playing a prohibited game rose to 4,000 baht.¹³⁸ The heavier fine for the latter offence suggests that the lawmakers perceived a differential in criminality between the two offences once more. Second, a new set of regulations for the inner monthons came into force on 1 April 1906.¹³⁹ The games of *thua po* were brought under the scope of the 1902 law and, along with *bia bok*, placed in the prohibited category. License fees for all Class 2 games and all card games were

¹³⁵ NA R.5 M.1.3/20, 'Damrong to Chulalongkorn, 27 June 1902'; *PKPS*, 18, pp. 431-2.

¹³⁶ 'Geo-body' is the term coined by Thongchai Winichakul to describe the territorial extent of a nation. See Thongchai Winichakul, *Siam Mapped: A History of the Geo-body of a Nation*, Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1994.

¹³⁷ NA R.5 M.1.3/20, 'Damrong to Chulalongkorn, 10 March 1906'.

¹³⁸ *PKPS*, 20, pp. 505-6. No mention was made of any increase in the maximum term of imprisonment so presumably it remained six months.

¹³⁹ For the complete regulations, see *PKPS*, 20, pp. 508-12.

increased.¹⁴⁰ Damrong later claimed this was purely to discourage gambling rather than to increase state revenue.¹⁴¹ Provincial governors were also granted greater powers to restrict Class 3 games: if they felt that trade was suffering or crime increasing, they could limit the number of licenses that might be issued in a specific area on any given day or, in extreme cases, totally prohibit the issuing of licenses.

Similar measures were also taken in the capital. In July 1906, the recently appointed Minister of Finance, Phraya Suriyanuwat, wrote to Naret lamenting the excessive number of card dens in Bangkok and recommended that permit fees be raised to six baht a day and 12 at night. The beauty of this was that: 'Even though card dens may be reduced by 80 percent, the government would still make a profit of over 200 percent from license fees. Revenue will rise by 300,000 baht per year.'¹⁴² Naret and the Bangkok police had some reservations about this, however. Raising permit fees could work in the provinces because there was no other legal outlet for gambling: but increasing fees in the capital would effectively put many card dens out of business and drive gamblers back into the gambling houses. Based on the assumption that the games played in the dens were the quickest road to poverty, higher permit fees would thus only lead to an increase in crime.¹⁴³ Yet, despite these fears, the proposed rise in card fees went ahead.¹⁴⁴ This highlights one of the tensions in formulating the government's policy on gambling; specifically, the recognition that strict regulation was necessary to discourage people from gambling but should legislation to be too restrictive it would encourage illegal gambling. Judging from the receipts from license fees, these precautions seem to have been successful in curbing

¹⁴⁰ License fees for cards were raised from 1 baht a circle per day to 4 baht for a day and 8 baht a night.

¹⁴¹ NA R.5 M.2.11/11, 'Report of meeting of provincial governors, 8 Sept. 1906'.

¹⁴² NA R.5 Kh.14.1.Kh/20, 'Suriyanuwat to Naret, 24 July 1906'.

¹⁴³ NA R.5 Kh.14.1.Kh/20, 'Report of the Council of Ministers, 2 Aug. 1906'; 'Naret to the Crown Prince, 23 Aug. 1906'.

¹⁴⁴ *PKPS*, 21, pp. 57-9.

card-playing. Although revenue rose from 665,365 baht in 1905/6 to 770,373 baht in 1906/7, the year in which the remaining provincial dens were closed, the fact that the price of a permit for playing cards during the day quadrupled at the start of the latter year indicates a sharp decline in the number of permits issued. Furthermore, over the next five years, revenue from license fees dropped to 650,469 baht in 1907/8 and to 521,903 in 1911/12.¹⁴⁵

Besides the abolition of the Bangkok gambling houses and the *huai* lottery, the Sixth Reign also saw an end to the long established custom of allowing the population to gamble freely during the three great annual holidays, namely, the Siamese and Chinese New Years and Songkran. Traditionally, these were times when people stopped work to make merit and take part in all manner of fun and games. In the past, sporting contests, such as running and boat-races, had been an integral part of the Songkran festival. This was a means of keeping the male population fit and ready to fight in the region's periodic wars. No doubt there was some small-scale gambling on the outcome of these contests and, perhaps to encourage them, a moratorium on the collection of gambling taxes was declared.¹⁴⁶ With the increase in Chinese immigration during the Third Reign, this was extended to the Chinese New Year as well. Moreover, as the kingdom began to enjoy relative peace from the mid-nineteenth century onwards, there was less need to keep large numbers of men in readiness for war and, according to the *Bangkok Times*, 'coincident with this the virility of the people began to find other and less praiseworthy outlets.'¹⁴⁷ By the Fifth Reign, the sports element of these festivities had almost disappeared as people devoted themselves to the Chinese gambling games and cards. To make matters

¹⁴⁵ *SY* 1931-33, p. 294.

¹⁴⁶ Damrong dates this dispensation back to the reign of King Taksin (1767-1782), attributing it as a morale raising measure during those years of conflict. Damrong, [Abolition], pp. 12-13.

¹⁴⁷ *BTWM*, 21 Oct. 1913.

worse, there was a sharp increase in banditry and illicit gambling once the festivals were over. Damrong therefore urged that the concession for free gambling be abolished.¹⁴⁸ For his part, Vajiravudh was very keen on the promotion of sport as a means of instilling nationalism. This interest stemmed from his time at school in England, where he was impressed by the fervour with which crowds of spectators cheered their football or cricket team and the camaraderie created by team sports. Promoting sporting activities was thus a key policy of the Sixth Reign; through it Vajiravudh hoped to restore the 'warrior spirit' – dissipated by indulgence in gambling, drinking and opium smoking – in the Thai man.¹⁴⁹ The royal decree abolishing free gambling, issued in October 1913, was thus part of this strategy.¹⁵⁰ Numerous athletics events were subsequently organised throughout the country. For the elite of Vajiravudh's generation, the suppression of gambling was a means of reviving tradition and checking a perceived national decline. However, it seems unlikely that this was successful in reducing the level of gambling during the festival periods. Indeed, the *Krungthep Daily Mail* reported the general opinion that the cancellation was really designed to increase revenue from the sale of permits since people would still gamble at these times.¹⁵¹ License fee revenue rose from 534,937 baht in 1912/13 to 699,313 in 1913/14 and then to 736,497 baht the following year.¹⁵² Clearly, people continued to gamble at these festivals; the only difference was that now the government profited from it.

As the closure of the last gambling houses grew imminent, there were a number of discussions about how to prevent the population from taking up other

¹⁴⁸ NA R.6 Kh.18/11, 'Damrong to Vajiravudh, 2 Oct. 1913'.

¹⁴⁹ Vella, *Chaiyo!*, p. 144.

¹⁵⁰ *PKPS*, 26, pp. 285-6. As a concession to local preference, this restriction was not applied in monthon Phayap until 1918. NA R.6 Kh.8/11, 'Chanthaburi to Vajiravudh, 28 May 1918'; *PKPS*, 31, pp. 133-4.

¹⁵¹ *KDM*, 19 Oct. 1913.

¹⁵² *SY 1931-33*, p. 294.

forms of gambling, card-playing in particular. The Director General of the Revenue Department, F. H. Giles, put forward a draft law that entailed a radical change to government policy: all games other than those specified in the law were to be forbidden.¹⁵³ This was an attempt to place European card games, which could apparently be played without license, on the same legal footing as Thai and Chinese ones. The draft law also outlined a comprehensive licensing system for gambling in private residences, members clubs and public card-rooms, and prescribed harsh penalties for all offences.¹⁵⁴ A number of objections to these provisions were raised, however. First, forbidding all games except those listed in the law was in direct contradiction to the principle of the existing legislation: that forbidden games and those requiring a license were specifically mentioned, while all games that were not listed could be played freely. Adopting the new, proposed principle was deemed impractical because the list of permitted games would have to include games of all the nationalities residing within the kingdom – Malay, Indian, Burmese, and Danish for instance – for it to be equitable. Perhaps more crucially, the existing principle was thought preferable because it conformed better with European laws on gambling. Second, the proposed licensing system was felt to be too complex: applying for a license and paying a fee might deter casual card-players but not compulsive gamblers. Moreover, it was argued that, ‘from the European point of view, such a system would be regarded as an undue interference with the liberty of the subject.’¹⁵⁵ The need to accommodate Western preferences and games was to remain an obstacle to the restriction of gambling throughout the period.

¹⁵³ NA K Kh.0301.1.3/7, ‘Note on the draft Gaming Law prepared by the Director General of the Revenue Department’.

¹⁵⁴ The penalty for gambling without a license, for example, was a maximum sentence of two years’ imprisonment or a 4,000 baht fine or both. Ibid.

¹⁵⁵ NA K Kh.0301.1.3/7, ‘Memorandum of a discussion, on 5th March 1917, between H. R. H. the Minister of Finance, the Financial Adviser, and the Legal Adviser to the Ministry, on Phya Indra Montri’s proposed new Gaming Law’.

In the end, the government introduced no pre-emptive legislation, preferring to adopt a policy of wait and see. Predictably enough, cards were the new craze within Bangkok. Just a few months after the last gambling houses had been closed, Chanthaburi observed how card dens, packed with players day and night, had sprung up along almost all the capital's streets. The problem was that the ministerial regulations for Bangkok were inadequate, and did not give local authorities enough power to restrict the issuing of permits. His solution was to replace the Bangkok regulations with the more rigorous ones introduced in the inner monthons following the closure of the provincial dens.¹⁵⁶ These were duly enacted in August 1917, with some minor adjustments to account for different rates for permit fees in the capital and the abolition of free gambling during the New Year holidays.¹⁵⁷ Yet this was not sufficient. If anything, the number of card dens continued to grow as people realised there was a good living to be made out of them: organisers collected entrance fees and commission on people's winnings. The strongest evidence of this boom in card-playing was the increase in revenue from license fees, which jumped from 715,091 baht in 1915/16 to 1,065,905 in 1916/17 and then almost doubled in 1917/18 to reach an all-time high of 2,129,025.¹⁵⁸ For Chanthaburi, there was little difference between these card dens and the recently deceased gambling houses; allowing people to make a living in this way was tantamount to the government nurturing vice and promoting poverty. But an outright ban would not work because gambling was a fundamental part of human nature. To forbid it would be to drive it underground and the state lacked the resources to suppress illegal gambling effectively. The Minister of Finance concluded that prohibition would be more harmful than allowing play to continue but

¹⁵⁶ NA R.6 Kh.2/12, 'Chanthaburi to Vajiravudh, July 1917'.

¹⁵⁷ *PKPS*, 30, pp. 366-9. In 1918, the regulations for monthon Phayap were also replaced with those for the inner monthons. *PKPS*, 31, p. 133-4.

¹⁵⁸ *SY 1931-33*, p. 294.

under stricter regulation.¹⁵⁹ The solution was a further refinement of the 1902 legislation. Under the Gambling Revenue Amendment Act B. E. 2461, promulgated in April 1918, anyone applying for a permit for any Class 3 game had to satisfy the licensing officer that it was going to be played only for pleasure, not for profit. Profit was defined as any money received by the licensee or another from any of the players, except as stakes on the game. The penalty for contravening this provision was a maximum fine of 1,000 baht or up to six months' imprisonment or both.¹⁶⁰ The impact of this act was immediate. Revenue from license fees dropped by over two-thirds to 581,626 baht in 1918/19, implying a considerable reduction in the amount of legal gambling.¹⁶¹

The year 1917 marked a shift in emphasis in the Siamese government's policy on gambling. By abolishing the *huai* lottery in 1916 and the gambling houses the year after, the absolute monarchy effectively rejected gambling as a major revenue source. Although the state continued to derive income from the sale of gambling licenses, this was primarily a restrictive measure rather than a revenue one. The success of this restrictionist policy was limited, however. As the following chapter will show, it was handicapped in particular by the temptation for the government to fall back on the promotion of gambling for fundraising. The end of the gambling tax farms also saw a shift in the rationale for regulating gambling. Previously, regulation had been designed largely to safeguard the financial imperatives of the tax farmers and the state. Now, the damaging socio-economic effects of gambling were to become the paramount concern. But despite these shifts, there was no corresponding change in the legal mechanisms for dealing with illegal gambling: the 1893 and 1902 laws

¹⁵⁹ NA R.6 Kh.2/12, 'Chanthaburi to Vajiravudh, 30 March 1918'.

¹⁶⁰ *PKPS*, 31, pp. 3-6.

¹⁶¹ *SY 1931-33*, p. 294.

remained the basic tools. Some forms of gambling were inadequately covered, if at all, by this legislation. Western forms posed a particularly strong challenge in this regard, in part because the Siamese government felt obliged to conform to European norms. Moreover, as the following chapter will show, Western games and betting activities were associated with modernity and *siwilai*, and thus held a certain appeal for elements of the Siamese elite. In contrast, the Chinese games played in the gambling houses and the *huai* lottery had come to represent backwardness and a bygone age. They had no place in the modernising kingdom of the early twentieth century.

3

Government Gambling Policy and Legislation, 1917-1945

This chapter will explore the Siamese government's attempts to deal with the various forms of gambling that sprang up in the wake of the abolition of the gambling tax farms and continued to evolve over the next thirty years as people sought to avoid government restrictions. This situation was exacerbated by the government's contradictory attitudes. Despite supposedly rejecting gambling as a major revenue provider, within a few years of the abolition of the gambling tax farms the absolute monarchy began to promote Western-style lotteries and other forms of gambling to raise money for prestige developmental projects. This approach was taken a step further by the constitutional governments that replaced the absolute monarchy following the 1932 coup. The first state lotteries were issued in the mid-1930s and these have persisted to the present day. Alongside these, the first Phibun Songkhram government (December 1938 to August 1944) briefly experimented with state-run casinos. However, from around the mid-1920s the absolute monarchy, and then its parliamentary successor, started to take a harder line towards privately organised gambling. These three themes – the emergence of new forms of gambling, the government restriction of private gambling, and the growth of state-sponsored gaming – form the core of this chapter.

Lotteries Unleashed

A profusion of card dens was not the only result of abolition. In 1916 and early 1917, there was a spate of public raffles in Bangkok. Some were set up by state and religious institutions for charitable causes, others were run solely for the benefit of

the organisers, who often tried to cheat their subscribers. Once it was established that raffles came under the 1902 law, and thus required a license, this craze seems to have subsided.¹ More problematic, however, were the numerous lotteries instituted by the kingdom's resident European communities during the First World War in order to raise funds for their countries' Red Cross organisations. Like raffles, lotteries were categorised as Class 2 gambling, meaning they could be conducted, subject to license, only on special occasions. Tickets for them could be sold only on those particular days.² Nevertheless, these restrictions seem to have been ignored in the case of the Red Cross lotteries. Indeed, their very success would have depended on tickets being available for purchase over a long period of time. To further complicate matters, lottery tickets issued in Siam's colonial neighbours were sometimes distributed for sale in the kingdom. Unsurprisingly, the Siamese government was none too happy about this situation. When the German Charge d' Affaires approached the government about setting up a lottery for the German Red Cross, Prince Devawonse, the Minister of Foreign Affairs, felt that 'it would be unfortunate if foreign legations should go extensively into the running of lotteries just at this time when the Royal Government itself was progressively restricting gambling among its own people.'³ However, the Siamese government was reluctant to deny the German request because it had done nothing to restrict a similar lottery organised by the French, and consent

¹ For details of these raffles see *BDM*, 1 March 1917, and the various newspaper clippings in NA R.6 N.20.17/15, 'Raffles'.

² NA R.6 B.11/2, 'Chanthaburi to Prachin, 5 Dec. 1919'. Whether lotteries set up by European residents, who enjoyed extraterritorial rights, came under the 1902 law is harder to discern. The British Red Cross lottery in Bangkok was licensed accordingly, whereas the French instituted theirs without first consulting the Siamese government. Nevertheless, S. H. Cole, the legal adviser to the Ministry of Finance, found the latter to be perfectly legal since it was not set up in Siam by persons subject to Siamese law and had been authorised by the French authorities. See NA K Kh.0301.1.3/7, 'Memorandum with reference to lotteries conducted in Siam by foreigners in aid of Red Cross funds, 29 January 1917 [by W. H. Pitkin, Adviser in Foreign Affairs]'; 'Opinion [by S. H. Cole]'; Note on Mr. Pitkin's Memorandum on lotteries [by S. H. Cole]'.
³ NA K Kh.0301.1.3/7, 'Memorandum with reference to lotteries conducted in Siam by foreigners in aid of Red Cross funds, 29 January 1917'.

was thus given.⁴ It is unclear whether the German lottery ever went ahead, though. In July 1917, the Siamese government abandoned its policy of neutrality and entered the war on the side of the Allies. It was hoped this might build up goodwill for the eventual renegotiation of the 'unequal' treaties. As part of Siam's war effort, plans were made to send an expeditionary force – consisting of automobile drivers, ambulance teams, and airmen – to France.⁵ Presumably, the German Red Cross lottery, if not yet drawn, was cancelled.

These Red Cross lotteries had a profound impact upon the government's gambling policy. Most fundamentally, they re-legitimised the use of gambling as a revenue provider: despite its avowed restrictionist policy, the Siamese elite had to concede that exploiting people's gambling instinct for charitable causes was acceptable under certain circumstances. Furthermore, they set a precedent for similar lotteries. In 1918, Siamese nationals in monthons Ratchaburi and Phuket set up lotteries to raise money for the expeditionary force and the Siamese Red Cross. The Ministry of Finance initially objected to these initiatives but, when it was revealed that the relevant local authorities had already granted permission and many of the tickets had already been sold, it was forced to consent, for otherwise the local authorities would have been liable for the losses incurred by cancellation. Nevertheless, Chanthaburi felt this state of affairs could not be allowed to continue. Since refusing all future applications might damage relations with the Western powers, he suggested laying down some strict criteria for lotteries: 'permission should only be given to people of reliable financial standing in proportion to the total value of the tickets, and that the persons who issue them must do so without any

⁴ NA K Kh.0301.1.3/7, 'Chanthaburi to Vajiravudh, 21 May 1918'.

⁵ For details of Siam's involvement in the First World War and the expeditionary force, see Vella, *Chaiyoi*, pp. 101-17; and Greene, *Absolute Dreams*, pp. 102-13.

profits to themselves.’⁶ Additionally, not less than a quarter of the proceeds from the sale of tickets were to be set aside for the charity or the Siamese government. The king agreed that permission to hold a lottery should be dependent on the merits of each case, noting that ‘when it is held with the object of contributing money in aid of a nation’s war, recourse to it seems all the more necessary’.⁷ A principle for regulating these wartime lotteries had been established. When the Royal Bangkok Sports Club asked for permission to conduct a 500,000 baht lottery in aid of the Siamese Red Cross and the expeditionary force, it was denied on the grounds that it did not meet the above criteria.⁸ As the government made clear, ‘permission to organise such a lottery... would not be sufficiently justifiable on the ground of charity [sic] to preclude it from being turned into a precedence which might possibly be made use of by others who have not so charitable an object.’⁹ But the damage had already been done. From later correspondence on the subject, it is clear that the Minister of Finance considered this special dispensation to run lotteries was a temporary wartime measure.¹⁰ Other elements of the Siamese elite did not share the same view, however.

In the first half of the 1920s, large-scale lotteries were to become a regular occurrence in Siam. This development was partly due to the funding requirements of Vajiravudh’s personal paramilitary unit, the Wild Tiger Corps (*Sua pa*). The king had established the Wild Tigers at the start of his reign as a means of promoting loyalty to the throne, fostering nationalism and instilling a sense of unity amongst civil servants. Since it received no allowance in the state budget, this organisation was dependent

⁶ NA K Kh.0301.1.3/7, ‘Chanthaburi to Vajiravudh, 21 May 1918’.

⁷ NA K Kh.0301.1.3/7, ‘Phanurangsi to Chanthaburi, 23 May 1918’.

⁸ NA R.6 B.11/1, ‘Chanthaburi to Yomarat, 19 June 1918’. The proposed donation was only 20 percent of the proceeds.

⁹ NA R.6 B.11/1, ‘H. M.’s Private Secretary to J. Caulfield James, 8 July 1918’.

¹⁰ NA R.6 B.11/2, ‘Chanthaburi to Prachin, 5 Dec. 1919’.

primarily on royal grants and membership fees for funding.¹¹ This placed a heavy strain upon the Privy Purse, already depleted by Vajiravudh's extravagant whims and taste for luxury.¹² Equipping the force with guns and ammunition meant the Wild Tigers also incurred significant debts – in the early 1920s, for instance, it owed an arms-dealer 538,000 baht – and this situation persisted until the end of the Sixth Reign.¹³ Lotteries were an attractive solution to the funding problem.

The economic crisis that beset the Siamese state in the immediate post-war period gave further impetus towards the lottery trend. The rising prices of silver and rice created a heavy demand for the baht, which although tied to gold, had a substantial silver content. A disastrous rice crop in 1919 then provoked a foreign-exchange crisis and a deficit in the kingdom's balance of trade. The end result was a series of budget deficits, which were exacerbated by increases in the monarchy's expenditure.¹⁴ The government sought to alleviate the problem by reducing its ordinary expenditures, which formed the major part of its total expenditure. Minimal amounts went on capital expenditures, such as public works and developmental projects, which in the recent past had been funded largely by foreign loans. But in 1922 and 1924, the government was forced to float two foreign loans to replenish the treasury's foreign currency reserves, which had been depleted during the crisis. Despite these belated attempts to resolve state finances, the king continued to exceed his personal budget and by the end of the reign the treasury's reserve fund had almost run out.¹⁵ In sum, the government had little capital for investment in projects, the development of a national air force in particular, that the absolute monarchy deemed

¹¹ For details of the Wild Tigers and its junior division, the Tiger Cubs (*Luk sua*), which was modelled on the Boy Scout movement, see Vella, *Chaiyo!*, Ch. 3; Greene, *Absolute Dreams*, pp. 41-6, 81-4.

¹² The Royal Division alone, which was under the direct control of the king, received 600,000 baht annually from the Privy Purse. Greene, *Absolute Dreams*, p. 164.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 140; NA R.6 B.11/7, 'Nonthisen to Vajiravudh, 17 Aug. 1923, 11 April 1924'.

¹⁴ Ingram, *Economic Change*, pp. 155-7, 190.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 190; Greene, *Absolute Dreams*, pp. 141-2, 158-9, 166.

essential for the welfare and security of the kingdom.¹⁶ Clearly, there was a compelling case for using lotteries as fundraisers.

The first such lottery appears to have been that organised by Chao Phraya Yomarat, the Minister of Local Government, in connection with a motor-racing meeting held at Sanam Luang in Bangkok during the Siamese New Year of 1920.¹⁷ To raise money for the Wild Tigers and Tiger Cubs, tickets of admission were sold in advance at one baht each, these then doubled up as a ticket for the lottery drawn on that day (for an example ticket see Figure 3.1a). At first, the Minister of Finance had fiercely opposed this scheme. As far as Chanthaburi was concerned the special allowance for the wartime lotteries had finished and Yomarat's lottery exceeded what was permitted under the 1902 law.¹⁸ Yet, in spite of Finance's opposition, Yomarat received special permission from the king for his lottery scheme.¹⁹ Similar events, which came to feature aviation displays as well, were held in 1922 and February 1923, with the value of the attendant lotteries rising to one million baht (see Figure 3.1b for an example ticket).²⁰ The latter event raised 200,000 baht for the Ministry of War to purchase aeroplanes.²¹

¹⁶ As the Financial Adviser Williamson noted in 1924, 'the nature of expenditures has undoubtedly deteriorated, and unless the tendency is checked there will be a danger of nearly the whole of the disbursements of the government consisting of salaries and contingencies – leaving practically nothing for permanent works, whether of a developmental or administrative character.' Quoted in Greene, *Absolute Dreams*, p. 161. On the security fears of the absolute monarchy and the establishment of the army aviation corps, see Vella, *Chaiyoi*, pp. 79-87.

¹⁷ NA R.6 B.11/2, 'Yomarat to Prachin, 4 Nov. 1919'.

¹⁸ NA R.6 B.11/2, 'Chanthaburi to Prachin, 5 Dec. 1919'.

¹⁹ NA R.6 B.11/5, 'Prince Nen to Devawongse, 4 Dec. 1920'.

²⁰ NA R.6 B.11/2, 'Yomarat to Chakraphan, 23 Feb. 1922; Khamrop to Ram Rakkhop, 26 Jan. 1923'.

²¹ *NT*, 11 July 1923.



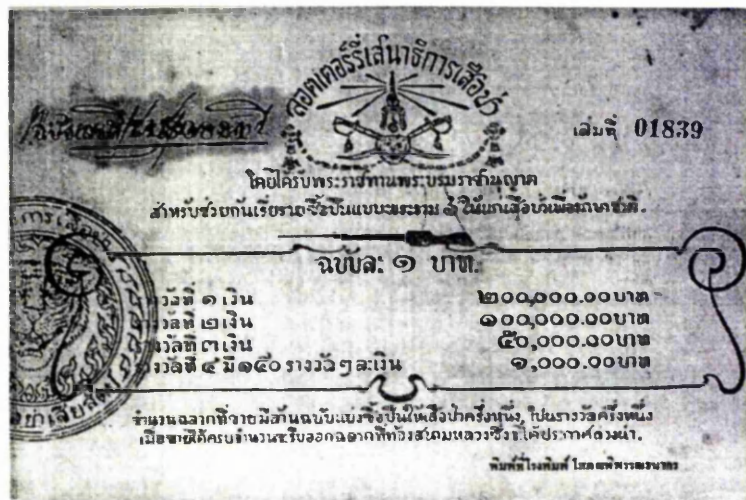
Figures 3.1a and b: Tickets for the motor-racing events in Bangkok (Source: Anake Nawigamune (comp.), *A Century of Thai Graphic Design*, London: Thames and Hudson, 2000, p. 65)

Over the same period, Phraya Nonthisen (Maek Siansewi), a royal favourite and the Chief of the Wild Tigers General Staff, also organised lotteries on behalf of the Wild Tigers. Like the motor-racing lotteries, these had royal approval and thus were not subject to the restrictions of the 1902 law.²² The first was issued in 1921 to raise money for the purchase of firearms, although it seems likely that the proceeds were used to pay off the debt to the arms-dealer mentioned earlier.²³ Tickets for a second went on sale in late 1923 and it was hoped the draw would be held before April 1924. A million tickets were issued for each (see Figures 3.2a and b). Provided

²² NA R.6 B.11/5, 'Prince Supphayokha to Chakraphan, 29 July 1922'; NA R.6 B.11/7, 'Chao Phraya Mahithon to Nonthisen, 20 Aug. 1923'.

²³ NA R.6 B.11/2, 'Yomarat to Chakraphan, 23 Feb. 1922'; Greene, *Absolute Dreams*, p. 140.

it sold out, the latter was to have a first prize of 100,000 baht, a second of 40,000 and a third of 10,000; there were also 650 smaller prizes of either 1,000 or 500 baht. After expenses, it was hoped that 30,000 baht might be raised for the Wild Tigers.²⁴



Figures 3.2a and b: Wild Tiger lottery tickets (Source: Anek, *A Century of Thai Design*, p. 65)

Other institutions and private groups also applied for permission to hold lotteries but most did not have the advantage of close contact with the king and were

²⁴ BTWM, 22 Aug. 1923.

refused. For instance, in late 1919 one Nai Hong Heng and 42 others petitioned Vajiravudh for permission to conduct a three million baht lottery to raise funds for the lengthening and dredging of the Singhanat canal in Ayutthaya province. Although this scheme would have benefited many and encouraged trade at no expense to the government, Chanthaburi insisted it was against the law and permission was refused.²⁵ However, as the examples of the motor-racing and Wild Tigers lotteries indicate, there was a sharp division of opinion within the government. While the Ministry of Finance objected to all large-scale lotteries, other members of the Siamese elite preferred to judge each lottery application on its merits. It was this latter group that held the upper hand. The Bangkok Nursing Home lottery, held to provide the funds for a rebuilding scheme, provides a good example of these tensions. As with previous cases, Finance opposed it on the grounds that it exceeded the provisions of the 1902 law. In addition, the nursing home was only open to members who paid a subscription and was thus of no benefit to the general public.²⁶ In spite of these objections, Vajiravudh sought the opinion of Prince Devawongse, the long-standing Minister of Foreign Affairs, who argued strongly in favour of the lottery.²⁷ It was promptly given the green light.

These conflicts of opinion are indicative of the deteriorating relationship between the king and Chanthaburi, the main cause of which was the latter's repeated refusals to increase Vajiravudh's personal budget.²⁸ Vajiravudh tried to neutralise his half-brother's power by overburdening him with ministerial duties: in 1919 Chanthaburi became Supervisor of Agriculture and a year later was also made

²⁵ NA R.6 B.11/4, 'Nai Hong Heng to Vajiravudh, 17 Dec. 1919'; 'Chanthaburi to Vajiravudh, 22 Dec. 1919'.

²⁶ NA R.6 B.11/5, 'Supphayokha to Chakraphan, 29 July 1922'.

²⁷ NA R.6 B.11/5, 'Chakraphan to Devawongse, 30 Aug. 1922'; 'Devawongse to Chakraphan, 30 Aug. 1922'.

²⁸ For details of the dispute see Greene, *Absolute Dreams*, pp. 117, 123-4.

president of the newly established Ministry of Commerce and Statistics. The king thereby hoped control of the ministries would fall to the more amenable assistant ministers.²⁹ In the case of Finance, this was Prince Nen – later to be Prince Supphayokha – who succeeded Chanthaburi as Minister of Finance in January 1923. At the same time, Chanthaburi was trying to divest Finance of responsibility for administering and applying the gambling laws. His basic argument was that now that gambling revenue was no longer a major source of income, determining the legality of particular forms of gambling should fall, as it did in other countries, to the administrative side of the state, namely the ministries of Local Government and the Interior.³⁰ A similar case was put forward by Prince Nen in 1921 and again in 1923.³¹ On both occasions, his proposal for a transfer of responsibility was resisted by Yomarat, who argued that the present system – whereby the administrative ministries were responsible for investigating and suppressing illegal gambling and Finance controlled licensing – functioned just fine.³² Nevertheless, it was the Ministry of the Interior – into which Local Government was incorporated in August 1922 – that came to make the important decisions on the licensing of lotteries and other new forms of gambling, with Finance being left out of the loop.³³

Despite the enthusiasm for lotteries amongst some of the elite and other organisations, they do not seem to have been as successful as their promoters might have hoped. The draws usually took place about a year after the tickets were first

²⁹ Ibid., pp. 127-8.

³⁰ NA R.6 B.11/2, 'Chanthaburi to Prachin, 5 Dec. 1919'.

³¹ NA R.6 N.11.5.Ch/14, 'Nen to Yomarat, 8 Aug. 1921'; NA R.7 Kh.2/2, 'Supphayokha to Vajiravudh, 25 May 1923'.

³² NA R.6 N.11.5.Ch/14, 'Yomarat to Nen, 17 Sept. 1921'; NA R.7 Kh.2/2, 'Yomarat to Mahithon, 14 Sept. 1923'.

³³ NA R.7 Kh.2/2, 'Ideas about suppressing gambling'. When the king granted special dispensation for the 1923 Wild Tiger lottery to go ahead, it was Interior, rather than Finance, that had to be informed of the decision. NA R.6 B.11/7, 'Nonthisen to Vajiravudh, 17 Aug. 1923'; 'Yomarat to Mahithon, 23 Aug. 1923'.

issued so as to give them plenty of time to sell.³⁴ Even then, however, they regularly failed to sell out: there were 400,000 tickets left over for Yomarat's one million baht lottery drawn in 1923, and the Bangkok Nursing Home lottery, for which there were only 250,000 tickets, did not sell out either.³⁵ As for the Wild Tiger lottery issued in 1923, the draw was first postponed to 1 September 1924, and in the end was not held until January 1925.³⁶ Phraya Nonthisen speculated that the reason for the slow take-up was that people did not have enough money to buy tickets.³⁷ It is more likely, though, that they were deterred by the scandals that had blighted previous lotteries.³⁸ People had good reason to be wary. When the Wild Tiger lottery was finally drawn in January 1925, Nonthisen and some of his associates committed a swindle whereby they conspired to hold the winning tickets for 40 odd prizes; some of which they claimed there and then, while others were later claimed under false names.³⁹ Suspicions of foul play were raised by a number of abnormalities: none of the winners of the top three prizes made donations from their winnings to charity and they shunned the limelight. Moreover, they were totally unknown to residents of those areas for which they had given an address, and, despite their best efforts, the police were unable to locate the winner of the third prize.⁴⁰ Lastly, none of the tickets for these prizes was creased or soiled in anyway.⁴¹ Despite a huge public outcry and a concerted campaign by local newspapers for a thorough inquiry, it was some six months before Vajiravudh ordered an investigation into the scandal. Although no accounts for the lottery were found, it was suspected they had been destroyed, the

³⁴ *BTWM*, 8 Nov. 1923.

³⁵ NA R.6 B.11/7, 'Nonthisen to Vajiravudh, 11 April 1924'.

³⁶ *Ibid.*; *SO*, 9 April 1924; Greene, *Absolute Dreams*, p. 165.

³⁷ NA R.6 B.11/7, 'Nonthisen to Vajiravudh, 11 April 1924'.

³⁸ *BTWM*, 21 March 1925.

³⁹ *BTWM*, 3 Sept. 1925; NA R.7 Y.4/1, 'Mahithon to Phraya Thepwithura, 25 July 1925'; Greene, *Absolute Dreams*, p. 164.

⁴⁰ *BTWM*, 9 Feb. 1925.

⁴¹ NA R.7 Y.4/1, 'Phraya Anuphap to Ram Rakkhop, 24 July 1925'.

committee found sufficient hints of wrongdoing for the case to be passed on to the Department of Public Prosecutions.⁴² At the same time, Phraya Nonthisen was declared *persona non grata* within the royal court.⁴³ In September 1925, he and five accomplices were charged with criminal misappropriation, destroying important evidence, and counterfeiting documents.⁴⁴ Over two years later, in which time the case passed through the Appeals Court and the Supreme Court, Nonthisen and one other defendant, Phraya Sitthi Sorasongkhram, were sentenced to 15 and six years imprisonment respectively, and ordered to repay the 253,106 baht they had embezzled.⁴⁵

Although public faith was severely shaken by this scandal, this did not curtail the regime's reliance on lotteries for fundraising. Vajiravudh had set his heart upon holding a national exhibition, modelled on the annual Wembley Exhibition in England, to mark the fifteenth year of his reign in November 1925. It was to be staged in Lumpini Park and would be a showcase for Siamese art, agriculture and industry. Foreign exhibitors would also be invited to display the latest agricultural machinery. The purpose of the Siamese Kingdom Exhibition was to promote economic development and increase awareness of the country, among both foreigners and Siamese.⁴⁶ Vella argues that Vajiravudh undoubtedly hoped that, by bringing large numbers of people together in a glorification of the country, the exhibition would instil pride in the Siamese nation.⁴⁷ Unsurprisingly, however, the government did not have the funds to complete the landscaping of the park, let alone cover the

⁴² NA R.7 Y.4/1, 'Phraya Ratchamanu to Mahithon, 24 July 1925'; 'Mahithon to Thepwithura, 25 July 1925'.

⁴³ Greene, *Absolute Dreams*, p. 167.

⁴⁴ BTWM, 3 Sept. 1925; NA R.7 Y.4/1, 'Report – Extract from letter No. 157/68'.

⁴⁵ NA R.7 Y.4/1, 'Phanurangsi to Phraya Chinda, 6 Oct. 1927'; Greene, *Absolute Dreams*, p. 167.

⁴⁶ On the construction of the park, and the planning of the exhibition and lottery, see BTWM, 29 Jan. 1925; Vella, *Chaiyo!*, pp. 174-5, 258; Greene, *Absolute Dreams*, pp. 164-5, 168-9.

⁴⁷ Vella, *Chaiyo!*, p. 259.

costs of the exhibition. Amongst other fundraising initiatives, a two million baht lottery, that was optimistically hoped to produce 600,000 baht in profit, was issued (for an example ticket see Figure 3.3).⁴⁸ Vajiravudh died shortly before the exhibition was scheduled to be opened, however, and his successor, King Prajadhipok, promptly cancelled it. Nevertheless, the drawing of the lottery went ahead, although it was postponed until April 1926 so it did not distract from this time of mourning.⁴⁹

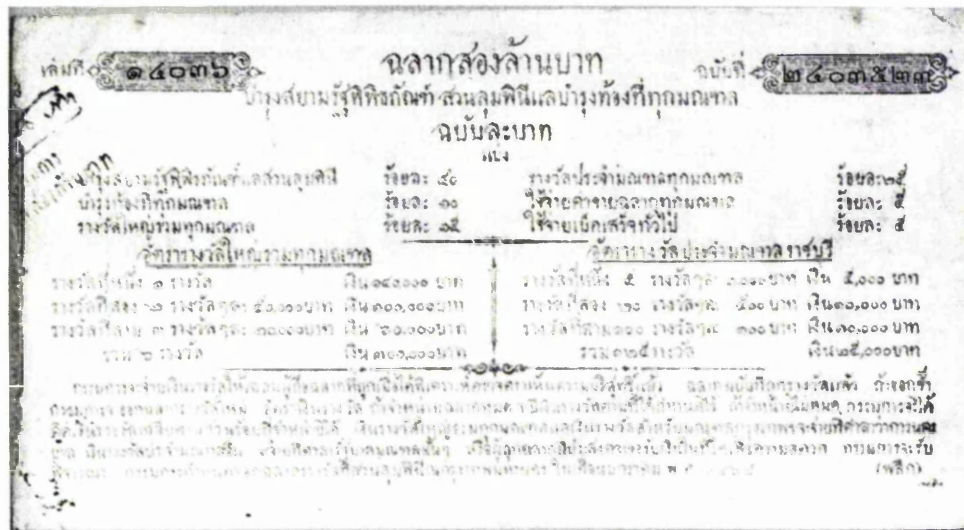


Figure 3.3: A Lumphini Park Lottery Ticket (Source: Anek, *A Century of Thai Design*, p. 65)

Vajiravudh's hope that the Siamese Kingdom Exhibition might instil nationalism within the population suggests a deeper purpose behind the frequent semi-official lotteries of the Sixth Reign. By appealing to people's love of a gamble, Vajiravudh's regime used lotteries to excite interest in, and encourage attendance at, patriotic events in aid of national development projects. Moreover, in purchasing a ticket, people would have been aware that they were one among many sharing the same dream of winning big and that, by supporting the lottery's cause, were

⁴⁸ Greene, *Absolute Dreams*, p. 165.

⁴⁹ NA R.6 B.11/8, 'Yomarat to Mahithon, 18 Dec. 1925'.

participating directly in the life of the nation. In short, lotteries were a mechanism for promoting nationalism. However, this potential was not to be fully realised until the dawn of the constitutional era in the 1930s.

All the Fun of the Fair

Lotteries were not the only way in which the Sixth Reign government continued to exploit the population's gambling habit as a revenue source. By the mid-1920s, fundraising fairs and fetes, where gambling was one of the key attractions, were being regularly staged in Bangkok and the provinces. Foremost among these was the capital's annual Winter Fair, usually held over a week in mid-January to mark the cool season. Organised by the royal court in aid of the Wild Tiger Corps and charities, it was the great social event of the year, attended by all levels of Bangkok society.⁵⁰ Attractions included arts and crafts exhibits, flower displays, miniature trains, switchbacks, Thai boxing contests, a dance hall with full orchestra, a roller-skating rink, and the ubiquitous gambling stalls – a kaleidoscope of colour and noise set in the illuminated splendour of one of the royal gardens.⁵¹ Gambling had long been a feature of the fair and the games were mostly of the Class 2 'fairground' variety: raffles for motorcars, wheels of fortune, fishing for prizes, target shooting and such like. By the 1920s, however, more serious forms of gaming, especially cards and dice games played for cash rather than prizes, had become prevalent. Although the legality of gambling for cash at such occasions was ambiguous – as will be shown in Chapter 5, some newspapers thought it was downright illegal – the advantages were obvious since it was guaranteed to increase the fair's appeal. In sum, the Winter

⁵⁰ Rachel Wheatcroft, *Siam and Cambodia in Pen and Pastel*, London: Constable & Co., 1928, pp. 165, 168; Ebbe Kornerup, *Friendly Siam: Thailand in the 1920s*, Bangkok: White Lotus, 1999, pp. 250-1.

⁵¹ For descriptions of the Winter Fair, see *BTWM*, 7 Jan. 1916, 8 Jan. 1917, 8 Jan. 1919, 6 & 10 Jan. 1921, 9 & 10 Jan. 1922, 12 Feb. 1923, 8 Jan. 1924, 19 Jan. 1925.

Fair had become little more than an excuse for gambling, as evidenced by the large numbers of people that would crowd around all the gaming stalls.⁵² One newspaper estimated that not more than 10 percent of the people went to see the sights – the rest were there to gamble.⁵³ Not for nothing was it known as the country's 'annual Monte Carlo'.⁵⁴

Money was raised through entrance fees, totalling about 245,000 baht for the 1924 fair,⁵⁵ and the rental of stall space. Gaming stalls at the 1923 fair cost 500 baht for the week, in addition to the fee for the gambling permit. The rent was considerably higher than that charged at similar events, such as the temple fair at the Golden Mount, but stallholders at the Winter Fair benefited from being allowed to pay out in cash rather than prizes.⁵⁶ Such were the profits to be made that there were not enough stall spaces to meet demand. Those who did secure spaces, mostly government officials and Chinese businessmen, might then sublet to others who were willing to pay up to 800 baht for the privilege.⁵⁷ One entrepreneur was even willing to submit a bid of one million baht for the rights to all the gaming stalls at the 1925 fair.⁵⁸ The level of gambling must have been extraordinary for stallholders to make a profit. As for the Wild Tigers, they received just over 300,000 baht from the 1924 fair, though this was considerably more than in previous years.⁵⁹ Clearly, it was a good little earner for all.⁶⁰

⁵² *BTWM*, 12 Feb. 1923, 8 Jan. 1924, 21 Jan. 1925.

⁵³ NA R.6 N.20.17/29, 'Fundraising initiatives of the Wild Tigers compared with other those of other organisations.

⁵⁴ *CSW*, 13 Feb. 1923.

⁵⁵ *Samphan thai*, 19 Jan. 1924. Entrance fees ranged from 25 satang (one quarter of a baht) to one baht depending on which section of the fair one wished to enter.

⁵⁶ *Satri sap*, 16 Dec. 1922.

⁵⁷ *Yamato*, 12 Dec. 1922; *CSW*, 11 Jan. 1923.

⁵⁸ *San phranakhon*, 24 Nov. 1924.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

⁶⁰ All except the king at least. It was rumoured that the 1924 fair cost the Privy Purse one million baht. *BTWM*, 28 Jan. 1924.

Similar fairs were also staged in the provinces, though if anything, the emphasis there was even more heavily on gambling. In August 1923, for instance, Phraya Khathathonbodi, the Lord Lieutenant (*samuha-thesaphiban*) of monthon Ratchaburi, held a week-long fete in Ratchaburi town to raise money to build an airstrip and purchase aeroplanes. The rights to the 32 gambling stalls were auctioned off for 42,600 baht and, as with the Winter Fair, playing for cash was permitted.⁶¹ The following year, the Lord Lieutenant staged another event, this time in aid of the Wild Tigers, where there was even more gambling: the rights to the 100 stalls fetched 114,500 baht.⁶² Both occasions were heavily attended by people from Bangkok.⁶³

During and after these fairs, local newspapers were full of horror stories detailing the malign effects of the unfettered gambling. Take for instance, the wife of a soldier who hanged herself after losing more than 7,000 baht at the Winter Fair, or the naval officer who slit his throat, apparently also out of despair at his losses.⁶⁴ The *Bangkok Times* carried a translation from the *Kammakon* newspaper, which conveyed the extent of the social damage:

in many cases husbands and fathers of families have pawned and sold everything they could lay their hands on in order to gamble away the proceeds at the Saranrom Gardens [the location of the Winter Fair]. In a number of such cases... the young children in these households have been crying for hunger because there has been no money to buy rice, the families have been turned out of their dwellings because the rent has not been paid, and husbands and wives have parted in anger.⁶⁵

Press opinion of these events will be examined more deeply in Chapter 5. The general consensus was that the facilities for public gambling at the fundraising fairs

⁶¹ *Sayam rat*, 16 July & 14 Aug. 1923; *BTWM*, 17 July 1923; *Yamato*, 26 July 1923. A similar event in aid of the air force was held in Phitsanulok province. *Sayam Rat*, 21 & 22 Feb. 1924.

⁶² *BTWM*, 25 Nov. 1925.

⁶³ *NT*, 9 Aug. 1923 & 22 Nov. 1924.

⁶⁴ *Samphan thai*, 19 Jan. 1924; *BTWM*, 21 Jan. 1924.

⁶⁵ *BTWM*, 21 Jan. 1924.

impoverished the population and encouraged crime, just as the *huai* lottery and gambling houses had done.

By the final years of the Sixth Reign, the Ministry of the Interior had come to this exact conclusion. In addition, it felt that the licensing of Class 2 gambling at fairs had too many inconsistencies: some regional authorities took a hard line and did not permit it at all, while others allowed excessive indulgence. Moreover, auctioning off the monopoly rights to gambling had enabled people to make a living by exploiting the general public. At the annual meeting of regional authorities for the year 1924/5, it was agreed that permission for Class 2 gambling should be cancelled throughout the provinces.⁶⁶ The cancellation was never implemented, however, due to the objections of some local authorities. They insisted that in times of hardship it was necessary to raise money in such a manner.⁶⁷ Once again, government initiatives to curtail gambling fell victim to financial necessity, and fundraising fairs with gambling continued to be held into the 1930s.

At the Races

Another form of gambling that benefited from the abolition of the gambling farms was that associated with horse-racing. Regular race meetings had been held since the Fifth Reign. In 1902, the Royal Bangkok Sports Club (hereafter the RBSC) was established by royal charter and was given a lease of land, on which it still stands today (for a contemporary photograph of the clubhouse see Figure 3.4).⁶⁸ Among its many purposes, the club was to 'promote horse breeding and to organise horse shows'.⁶⁹ Siamese ponies were generally used in the races and the methods of betting

⁶⁶ NA R.6 N.11.5.Ch/17, 'Ministry of the Interior consultation on Class 2 gambling'.

⁶⁷ NA R.7 Kh.2/2, 'Ideas about suppressing gambling'.

⁶⁸ Wright and Breakspear (eds), *Twentieth Century Impressions*, p. 236.

⁶⁹ NA R.5 N.20/10, 'Translation of draft of royal charter'.

included a totalisator, the bookmakers, and sweepstakes. Originally, the government wanted to tax the club's gambling operations, which would also have required a special permit from the Ministry of Finance.⁷⁰ The club's president, A. E. Olarovsky, objected strongly to these proposals, reasoning that free permission for the tote and lotteries should be given because 'all over the world [they] are not considered gambling and are not subject to gambling laws'.⁷¹ Moreover he argued that, with the exception of France, no country taxed the tote and if the club were burdened with such taxes in its infancy, it would be unable to function.⁷² The government was swayed by these arguments. The club was granted a tax exemption for three years – although this does not seem to have been rescinded after that time – and, as mentioned in Chapter 2, horse-racing was not covered by the 1902 gambling law. The RBSC was later joined by the Turf Club, which presumably enjoyed similar privileges.

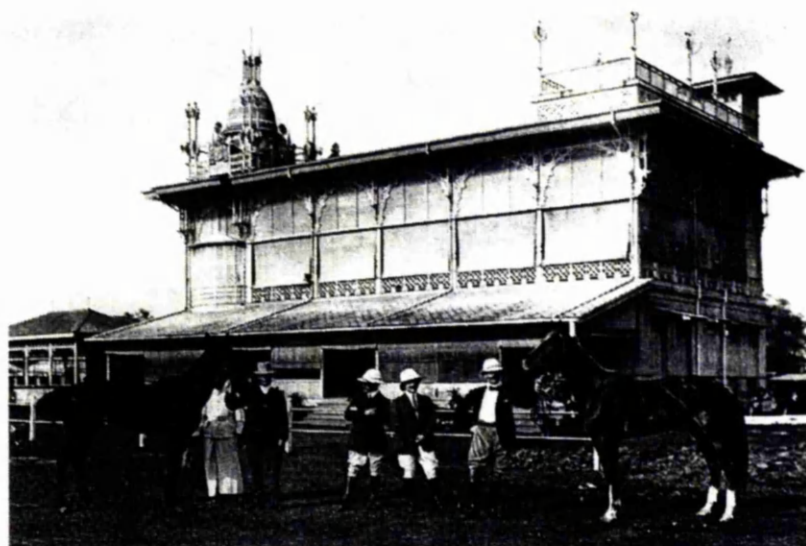


Figure 3.4: The Royal Bangkok Sports Club clubhouse (Source: Steve Van Beek, *Bangkok Then and Now*, Bangkok: A B Publications, p. 101)

⁷⁰ NA R.5 N.20/10, 'Naret to Chulalongkorn, 28 June 1901'; 'Contract for the leasing of land to the RBSC'.

⁷¹ NA R.5 N.20/10, 'Olarovsky to Chulalongkorn, Aug. 1901'.

⁷² NA R.5 N.20/10, 'Olarovsky to Sommot, 17 & 18 Aug. 1901'.

Betting on horse-racing was therefore very loosely regulated. This was no doubt due in part to its status as the 'sport of kings', reinforced in Siam by royal patronage, and its image as a refined, upper-class pursuit. In short, it was *siwilai*. Furthermore, the government may have thought it would have limited appeal for the ordinary Siamese, and thus was not as potentially harmful as other forms of gambling. Indeed, for the first two decades of the twentieth century, only upper-class Siamese and Westerners attended race meetings.⁷³ Lack of regulation meant that the two clubs were perfectly placed to take advantage of the abolition of the gambling tax farms, though.

In the early 1920s, horse-racing experienced an enormous surge in popularity and every race day, of which there were three or four every month, the courses were packed with spectators. Every section of Bangkok society was present: men and women, nobles and commoners, government officials and military officers, coolies and clerks, wealthy businessmen and destitute beggars, even monks. Banks and government offices would close early so their employees could make haste to the races. Employers would be approached for loans by staff claiming that their parents or children were sick but who would then be found at the racecourse. Pawnshops would enjoy increased business. In 1923, at the height of racing's popularity, over 12,000 people attended one meeting at the Turf Club.⁷⁴ It was widely recognised that this had little to do with a sudden interest in the sport itself but, rather, was due to the opportunity for legal gambling that the race meetings provided.⁷⁵ According to the *Bangkok Times*, 'Nine-tenths of the outside public have no interest at all in the racing, and this they show by leaving the course the moment they have lost all their

⁷³ *Sayam sakkhi*, 7 July 1923.

⁷⁴ *BTWM*, 9 May 1922 & 18 July 1923; *NT*, 18 April 1923; *CSW*, 25 June 1923; *Sayam Sakkhi*, 9 July 1923.

⁷⁵ 'Why is horse-racing so popular with the general public?' asked one Thai newspaper rhetorically. 'The answer is easy: it's [because of] the lotteries.' *Sayam sakkhi*, 7 July 1923.

money.⁷⁶ Of all the ways of betting, the most popular was the one-baht sweepstakes, introduced in 1920, which were held on each of the six to eight races run every race day. They were affordable to most, offered considerable prizes, and required no skill or knowledge of horse-racing to play.⁷⁷ When the sweepstakes were first launched, the prizes ranged from 200 baht to 1,800 but in 1923 the first prize was raised to the princely sum of 4,000 baht, further enhancing the appeal of the sweeps.⁷⁸ At one Turf Club meeting in July 1923, it was estimated that 35,000 baht changed hands on the sweeps alone.⁷⁹ For the press and some sections of the reading public, these sweeps were nurturing the population's gambling obsession, impoverishing Bangkok's lower-classes, and accentuating social problems. In brief, the racecourses had become little more than open-air gambling dens.⁸⁰

After a concerted campaign by some of the Thai- and English-language newspapers, the government finally took action. On 17 July 1923, the Bangkok Police Commissioner, Phraya Athikon Prakat, informed the two clubs that the one-baht sweeps were henceforth prohibited.⁸¹ The impact was immediate: the race meeting at the RBSC on 21 July was practically deserted.⁸² While the ban was well received by the Thai-language press, and most of the Bangkok population apparently,⁸³ some of the English-language papers criticised the move. Besides concern about the impact

⁷⁶ *BTWM*, 9 May 1922.

⁷⁷ As the racing correspondent for the *Bangkok Times* observed: 'I know of hundreds, who never even see the running of the race but await the hoisting of the numbers of the winning ticket and rejoice or despair over the result.' *BTWM*, 13 May 1922.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*; *BTWM*, 9 May 1922; *CSW*, 18 July 1923.

⁷⁹ *BTWM*, 18 July 1923.

⁸⁰ For examples of these sentiments, see *Sayam sakkhi*, 9 July 1923; *CSW*, 18 July 1923; *BTWM*, 28 & 31 Jan. 1924.

⁸¹ *BTWM*, 18 July 1923.

⁸² *Yamato*, 26 July 1923.

⁸³ *Ibid.*; *KDM*, 25 July 1923; *Sayam sakkhi*, 10 Aug. 1923.

upon the clubs' finances, the wisdom of prohibition was questioned.⁸⁴ As the *Bangkok Times*' racing correspondent argued:

The Sweeps were a very mild form of a game of chance and with their closure it is but natural to expect that new and more desperate means of gambling will be resorted to. For a hundred years the spirit of gambling has been encouraged in this country, and in the opinion of not a few experienced men it is an error of judgment to seek suddenly to prohibit any indulgence of this weakness of nature without providing a more gradual means to the end.⁸⁵

The original newspaper campaign against the sweeps will be examined in Chapter 5. For now it suffices to note the influence of the press on government policy. Both clubs tried to find new ways to appeal to the public and circumvent restrictions imposed on their betting operations – lowering the minimum stake for bets on a win or a place from five baht to one, for instance.⁸⁶ Nevertheless, horse-racing's heyday had passed.

The government's approach to gambling during the latter half of the Sixth Reign was highly contradictory. The *Straits Times* summed it up as follows: 'When you stop one innocent form of gambling such as the one tical sweeps at the local races and sell gambling rights of a province for over Ticals 42,000 [a reference to the 1923 Ratchaburi fair] it would appear that there is something wrong somewhere. Is it that gambling is quite legal if the State reaps benefit?'⁸⁷ The roots of this contradiction lay in the financial imperatives and problems of the Siamese state. It meant that playing cards without a license was a harmful 'evil' that needed to be suppressed and punished but buying a Wild Tiger lottery ticket was a welcome and patriotic act, although the player's motivation was essentially the same in both cases:

⁸⁴ The objections of the English-language press were addressed in an editorial in the *Chino sayam warasap*. *CSW*, 21 July 1923.

⁸⁵ *BTWM*, 20 July 1923.

⁸⁶ *Yamato*, 26 July 1923.

⁸⁷ Article reproduced in *BDM*, 21 Aug. 1923.

the hope of personal enrichment. In short, gambling was acceptable so long as it benefited the nation or, more crucially, the state.

Gambling during the Seventh Reign

The legacy that Vajiravudh bequeathed to his successor, and the last of Siam's absolute monarchs, was an unenviable one. Upon his accession to the throne, King Prajadhipok was immediately faced with a range of unresolved political, economic and social problems. Not least among these was the issue of gambling. Since the abolition of the gambling tax farms, underground dens had flourished, in many cases with the support and protection of government officials. This was blamed for rising crime levels and greater poverty.⁸⁸ Moreover, judging from local newspapers and government reports, government officials and their wives were some of the most inveterate gamblers. Besides making a mockery of state efforts to curb the vice, their gambling habit often led to debt, fraud, and corruption.⁸⁹ Combined with scandals such as that surrounding the Wild Tiger lottery and the blatant contradictions in government policy, this had given critics of the absolute monarchy ample ammunition. It was thus imperative that the government settle upon a consistent gambling policy. The Winter Fairs were discontinued and, besides the Lumpini Park lottery which was already underway, the Seventh Reign government abandoned the use of gambling as a fundraising device. No more lotteries were initiated in Siam until the 1930s, although lotteries issued overseas were sometimes allowed to be sold in the kingdom.⁹⁰ This lessening of dependence upon gambling for revenue was made possible by the restoration of financial stability in the late 1920s. In early 1926, the

⁸⁸ NA R.7 Kh.2/2, 'Ideas about suppressing gambling'.

⁸⁹ Ibid. Among other examples of gambling's pernicious effects, the writer of this report told of how a wife of low-level official had been reduced to prostitution to pay off her gambling debts.

⁹⁰ In 1927, for instance, the French colonial government in Indochina issued a lottery in aid of flood victims in Tonkin, tickets for which were sold in Bangkok. *Si krung*, 6 Jan. 1927.

new king launched an economy drive to reduce government spending, which he led by example in cutting royal expenditures. By the late 1920s, state finances were on a sound basis once more; the government even managed to record budget surpluses. This was aided by the successful revision of the 'unequal' treaties, which allowed for a modest rise in import duties with a consequent increase in revenue.⁹¹ Furthermore, Prajadhipok took a hard line on government officials involved in any gambling that compromised their duties, instituting a number of disciplinary procedures that will be dealt with in Chapter 4. This was mirrored by a broader clampdown on illegal gambling: the number of people convicted for gambling offences rose significantly in the second half of the 1920s, from 10,586 in 1925/6 to 18,850 in 1929/30.⁹² According to a contemporary scholar, greater police activity and harsher sentencing by the courts meant 'innumerable forms of petty gambling were dying out'.⁹³

Nevertheless, people continued to find ways to evade government restrictions and get their gambling fix. Two variants of billiards were the craze of the late 1920s. Billiards had been played in gentleman's clubs, both for Westerners and Siamese, since the 1910s, perhaps earlier, and, like other Western imports, was not covered by existing gambling legislation.⁹⁴ However, following a clampdown on street gambling – games such as *yot lum* that involved pitching coins – labourers and teenage boys turned to a variant of billiards, called billiard *ru*.⁹⁵ It was played on a table with nine holes set into the far end, each of which carried a different points value, and three balls (see Figure 3.5). The winner was the first player to reach a certain number of points. It was normally played by 2 to 4 people and the usual bet was one or two baht

⁹¹ Ingram, *Economic Change*, p. 190; Batson, *End of the Absolute Monarchy*, pp. 34-6, 90-4.

⁹² *SY* 1929-30, pp. 302-3.

⁹³ Landon, *Chinese in Thailand*, p. 91.

⁹⁴ See the numerous newspaper clippings on billiards competitions in NA R.6 N.20.17/13, 'Kanphanan binliat'.

⁹⁵ *KDM*, 25 May 1928.

per game, although children might bet as little as 10 satang.⁹⁶ Like other forms of popular gaming, billiard *ru* required little skill and, according to the press, tended to be paid purely for betting purposes.⁹⁷ By mid-1928, the game had spread throughout the country: it was so popular in Saraburi province that owners of tables did not have to engage in any other form of work.⁹⁸ One newspaper declared it ‘the age of little billiards’ in the capital.⁹⁹ It was not long before newspapers began to carry reports of fraud, burglaries, violent quarrels, divorces and suicides that were all attributed to the game’s pernicious influence.¹⁰⁰ As with previous gambling crazes, they pressed the government to take action.

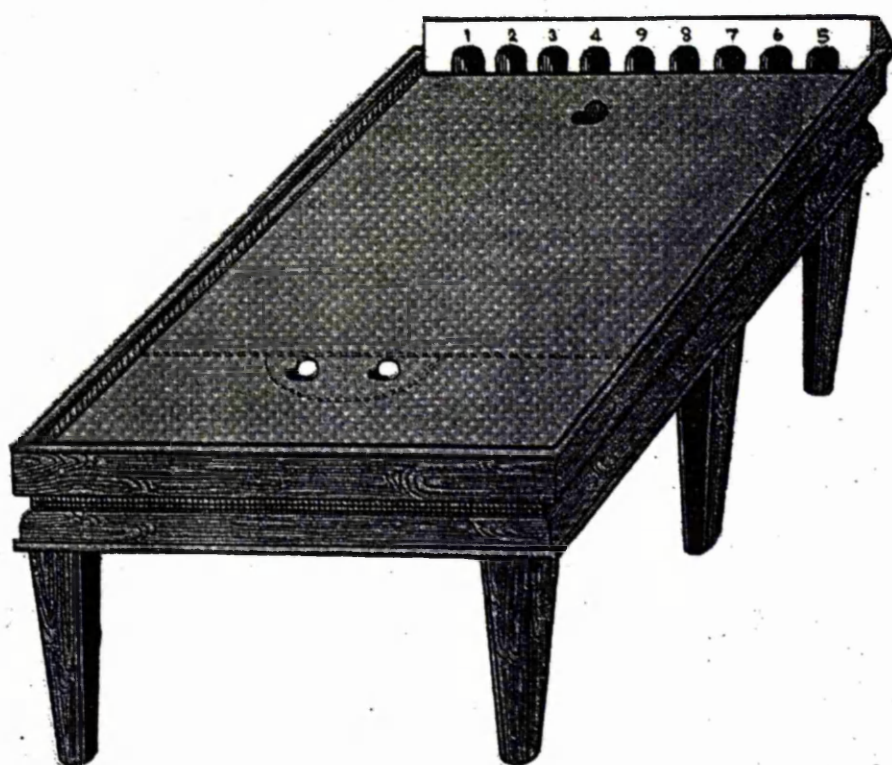


Figure 3.5: A billiard *ru* table (Source: Phakdi, *Khamnbanyai*)

⁹⁶ Ibid.

⁹⁷ Ibid.; *NT*, 13 June 1928; *Si krung*, 13 Aug. 1928; *Bangkok kanmuang*, 25 Aug. 1928.

⁹⁸ *NT*, 13 June 1928.

⁹⁹ *Si krung*, 15 June 1928.

¹⁰⁰ *NT*, 5 July 1928; *KDM*, 3 & 13 Oct. 1928; *Bangkok kanmuang*, 30 Jan. 1929.

It was against this backdrop that the government began to consider drafting a new gambling law. The consensus was that the existing legislation was deficient and out of date. First, the 1902 law had been designed with the taxation of gambling in mind rather than its restriction. Second, the requirement that all games under the scope of the act had to be specified by name failed to take account of the fact that the forms and methods of gambling were constantly evolving, as evidenced by the spread of billiard *ru*. Stemming from this, courts commonly dismissed cases of illegal gambling on the grounds that the game being played was not mentioned in the relevant laws. Once again, the idea of a blanket prohibition on all forms of gambling, with exceptions for certain games on certain occasions or when specific criteria were met, was raised.¹⁰¹ The focus of this proposed law was to be the suppression of gambling rather than the protection of revenue. As in the past, however, this principle was rejected as too radical. For the Minister of Justice, defining gambling was extremely difficult, and the possibility of people being imprisoned for something as innocuous as playing golf for cigarettes was brought up. Nevertheless, it was agreed that the legislation needed revising and that, reflecting the shift in focus, responsibility for issuing regulations and administering the law should be transferred from Finance to the Ministry of the Interior.¹⁰² Work on drafting a new law began in September 1928.

Once news of the drafting became public, rumours began to circulate that billiard *ru* would be prohibited under the new legislation.¹⁰³ This had an interesting, though unintentional, side-effect. Although the government took no further immediate actions against the game, owners of billiard halls began to convert their tables so that another variant, billiard *lum*, might be played instead and the impending

¹⁰¹ NA R.7 Kh.2/2, 'Boriphat to Prajadhipok, 8 Aug. 1928'.

¹⁰² NA R.7 Kh.2/2, 'Extract from the Council of Ministers, 18 Aug. 1928'.

¹⁰³ *Lak muang*, 15 Oct. 1928.

ban avoided. Because this version had been around for a long time and was commonly found in Western hotels, these owners believed it would escape the ban. Moreover, by converting to *lum* they hoped to circumvent the recent prohibition on government officials playing *ru* and thereby enjoy an increase in custom.¹⁰⁴ *Lum* used a similar scoring system to *ru* but was played on a regular billiards table. By February 1929, it was estimated that there were up to 900 billiard *lum* tables in the capital, ten times as many as there were for *ru*.¹⁰⁵ According to the *Krungthep Daily Mail*, not one table was free during Chinese New Year and the billiard halls resembled the gambling houses of old.¹⁰⁶ Predictably, some elements of the press expressed concern about this latest development and once again urged the government to do something.¹⁰⁷ Rather than wait for the new law to be enacted, the police launched a clampdown in February 1929 on a number of operators on the grounds that they had set up tables outside and were obstructing the roads.¹⁰⁸ Shortly after, the Director General of the Public Prosecutions Department ruled that billiard *lum* had similar characteristics to some forbidden games and it was promptly prohibited by the Bangkok Police Commissioner.¹⁰⁹ Besides illustrating the power of the press, this example demonstrates how gambling organisers and players often remained one step ahead of the law. Gambling legislation was like an old, leaking ship. Once one hole had been plugged, another would quickly appear. The principle on which it was founded – that all gambling was legal except for that proscribed in legislation – meant that making the law watertight was impossible; people were constantly finding novel and inventive ways of breaching the ship's hull.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid.

¹⁰⁵ *KDM*, 13 Feb. 1929.

¹⁰⁶ *KDM*, 10 Feb. 1929.

¹⁰⁷ See for instance *Bangkok kanmuang*, 4 Feb. 1929.

¹⁰⁸ *Bangkok kanmuang*, 7 Feb. 1929.

¹⁰⁹ *KDM*, 19 & 20 Feb. 1929.

After two years of discussions and preliminary drafts, the Gambling Act B. E. 2473 and its attendant ministerial regulations were finally issued in September 1930, annulling all previous gambling legislation.¹¹⁰ As mentioned above, this law adhered to the principle of specifying forbidden games and those that required a license. There were 24 of each. Joining the banned list were some that had previously required a license, such as *si ngao lak*, and a few new games that had become so widespread as to alarm the government, including the two variants of billiards and the dice game *hi-lo*. More importantly, the range of games that required a license was broadened: bookmaking, bingo, sweepstakes and totes were now included, and the procedure for licensing large-scale lotteries finally standardised. Besides the usual permit fees, a 10 percent tax was imposed on lotteries, raffles, sweeps, totes and bookmaking; ensuring the state might profit directly from these undertakings. Moreover, people wishing to sell foreign lottery tickets now had to apply for a permit and also pay this tax. Regulations governing the conduct of licensed games were also tightened. Operators of fairground gambling games – bingo, target shooting, throwing rings over prizes and suchlike – could no longer offer monetary prizes and were prohibited from taking back any prizes in return for cash. In all cases, the price of permit fees was increased substantially. With regard to penalties, all offences carried a maximum sentence of two years or a fine of up to 5,000 baht or both. This was a significant increase in the tariff. Significantly, the courts were given a relatively free hand in the sentencing of gambling offenders.

The law did make some concessions to public tastes, however. As noted in a Ministry of the Interior circular, the purpose of the new act was to eliminate harmful forms of gambling, while relaxing the regulations on games played for

¹¹⁰ For the complete act and regulations see *PKPS*, 43, pp. 143-55.

entertainment.¹¹¹ Therefore, playing cards or billiards in private homes between family and friends, or in clubs between members, no longer required a permit, provided it was done for entertainment and the organiser or owner of the house received no commission. Card games could only be played in this way between midday and 2am.¹¹² This allowance was a reflection of how widespread unlicensed card playing in private homes had become. No doubt due to the inherent difficulties in detecting such violations, people had been gambling on cards without fear of arrest.¹¹³ 'Free' card playing was a state recognition of the futility of attempting to enforce this aspect of previous legislation and the burden it placed upon an overstretched police force. In this respect, the Seventh Reign government adopted a realistic, practical approach to the gambling problem.

Two controversial aspects of this law were the provisions in Sections 5 and 6, which read as follows:

Section 5 – In the case of anyone who arranges for or promotes games which are usually considered to be gambling games, whether the stakes be money or other property, the law assumes that such person arranges such games to derive personal profit. And anyone who takes part in such games is assumed by the law to be gambling for money or other property.

Section 6 – Any person found in the circle (*wong*) where there is being played a game that contravenes this Act, the Ministerial Regulations or the conditions of the license, is assumed to be taking part in the game. This Section does not apply to spectators of games at fairs, markets or other public places.¹¹⁴

As a contemporary commentary on the act observed, these effectively reversed the established Western legal principle whereby the prosecution was responsible for proving the guilt of the defendant.¹¹⁵ In other words, if the accused contested the prosecution's claim that they were gambling illegally, it was up to them to prove they

¹¹¹ *Thesaphiban*, 30, pp. 801-2.

¹¹² *PKPS*, 43, p.153.

¹¹³ Anek, [Thai Card Games], p. 13.

¹¹⁴ *PKPS*, 43, pp. 144-5.

¹¹⁵ *Thesaphiban*, 30, pp. 739-41.

were not. This was tantamount to a presumption of guilt until proven innocent and, from a Western legal point of view, highly dubious. The original draft had gone even further: anybody arrested while leaving or entering a place where gambling was going on was presumed to have participated in the gambling, and in cases where the defendant was the owner of the building, the slightest hint that they might have known of the gambling was reason enough to presume they were fully aware of it.¹¹⁶ While reviewing this draft, the Council of Ministers decided to cut these particular provisions because they contradicted legal norms.¹¹⁷ That some of these specific measures did survive is a reflection of the inherent difficulties in prosecuting gambling cases successfully and, like the rise in penalties, a testament to the seriousness with which the government viewed the gambling problem.

By the time the new law was promulgated, Siam had begun to feel the impact of the worldwide economic depression. Crop failures in May 1930 were swiftly followed by a slump in rice exports and by early 1932 the price of rice had fallen to one-third of its 1930 value.¹¹⁸ The economic crisis was exacerbated by the Siamese government's decision to remain on the gold standard when Britain abandoned it. The high foreign currency price of Siam's rice, compared to rice sold in currencies that had left the gold standard, made it uncompetitive. This led to a severe reduction in farmers' cash income and an inability to pay their taxes or debts. Consequently, purchase of retail goods and expenditure on 'non-essentials' such as merit-making and marriages declined. There was a flood of petitions to the king calling for reductions in the capitation and land taxes to alleviate the economic distress. Moreover, a drop in imports and exports meant a fall in government revenue and by early 1932 the necessity of cutting state expenditures by one-third was painfully

¹¹⁶ NA R.7 Kh.2/2, 'Draft of Gambling Law 247...'.
¹¹⁷ NA R.7 Kh.2/2, 'Report of the Council of Ministers, 4 Feb. 1929'.
¹¹⁸ Batson, *End of the Absolute Monarchy*, pp. 188, 207.

apparent. The government embarked upon another round of retrenchment, more drastic than the last. Many government officials were dismissed or had their salaries cut. The bureaucracy was also burdened with a new salary tax.¹¹⁹ Given all this, it is hard to assess the exact effect of the 1930 law on gambling. Revenue from license fees rose slightly in the crisis years – from around 340,000 baht in 1929/30 to just over 420,000 in 1931/2 – before falling to just under 380,000 baht in 1932/3.¹²⁰ This was more likely a result of the rise in permit prices and the increased number of activities that required licensing rather than a reflection of higher levels of legal gambling. There was also a drop in the number of people convicted for illegal gambling, from 18,580 in 1929/30 to 16,006 in 1930/1 and then to 12,588 the following year.¹²¹ Since the government did not abandon its policy of suppression, these figures suggest a decrease in illegal gambling.

Nevertheless, there are indications that the allowance for ‘free’ card playing was taken up enthusiastically by all levels of Siamese society, from nobles and government officials down to the common man. In his memoirs, Khun Wichit Matra recalls that it was during this period that the phrase *pai yat mit*, meaning ‘to go [and see] relatives and friends’, became slang for ‘to play cards.’¹²² The most graphic illustration of the boom in card playing was the expansion of the local playing-card industry. In the early 1930s, the three principal card manufacturers were churning out 5,000 packs a day, while other companies produced around 2,000. This eliminated the problem of having to import cards from China or the West, making cards more easily

¹¹⁹ Wyatt, *Thailand*, pp. 227-8; Batson, *End of the Absolute Monarchy*, pp. 207-8.

¹²⁰ *SY 1931-33*, p. 294.

¹²¹ Convictions for gambling as a percentage of total convictions and the ratio of people convicted per 10,000 of population also decreased over the same period. *SY 1931-33*, pp. 354-5.

¹²² Wichit, [80 Years], p. 95.

available and cheap.¹²³ From this it can be surmised that people played cards as a respite from the economic and political turbulence of the early 1930s.

In 1932, at the lowest point of the crisis, the Siamese Red Cross requested permission to conduct a 500,000 baht lottery. This organisation relied on donations from the public and the government for its income but these had dried up, and it had been unable to balance its budget for the year 1932/3. Income from the lottery was vital if it was to continue all its operations. Although lotteries had fallen out of favour during the Seventh Reign and this was the first request for several years, both the king and the Minister of the Interior, Prince Boriphat, supported the proposal; arguing that the lottery would benefit public welfare and the government, which stood to receive 50,000 baht in tax. Boriphat gave weight to his opinion by noting that a Royal Commission on Lotteries and Betting had recently been set up in Britain to consider relaxing the prohibition on lotteries in aid of public charities.¹²⁴ A final decision was deferred to the next meeting of the Council of Ministers, scheduled for 27 June 1932.¹²⁵ But the Siamese Red Cross had to wait a little longer for a reply. On 24 June 1932, a small group of disaffected military officers and low-level civilian bureaucrats, the self-styled People's Party, staged a remarkably bloodless coup, bringing an end to the absolute monarchy and instituting a new age of constitutional government.

The Birth of the State Lotteries

Under the direction of the People's Party but in active consultation with the king, a constitution that invested supreme authority in a partially elected National Assembly was drawn up. The permanent version of this constitution was proclaimed on 10

¹²³ Anek, [Thai Card Games], p. 14.

¹²⁴ NA R.7 M.15/4, 'Boriphat to Mahithon, 17 June 1932'; NA (2) SR.0201.101/1, 'Cover Sheet – Royal Opinion, 20 June 1932'. On the Royal Commission, see Munting, *Economic and Social History*, p. 58.

¹²⁵ NA R.7 M.15/4, 'Wibun to Damrong, 24 June 1932'.

December 1932. Yet, despite the change in leadership and all its professed democratic ideals, real political change was slight. The People's Party was the real power in the country and it attempted to halt any challenges to its authority by outlawing rival political parties. In other words, a small royal elite was merely replaced by an equally small elite composed of military officers, old-school bureaucrats and younger officials. Within this loose coalition, there was fierce jockeying for power during the first years of the constitutional era. From this emerged two figures who were to play a central role in the politics of the 1930s and 1940s: Phibun Songkhram, head of the military faction, and Pridi Phanomyong, leader of the civilians. Both saw the promotion of certain forms of gambling and the suppression of others as a means to shape Siamese society to their divergent ideals. Economically, the new regime had the good fortune to come to power at the worst point of the depression. Recovery was rapid: exports began to grow almost immediately, as did the government's revenues. Indeed, despite all the problems, budget surpluses were the norm during the 1930s. Financial conservatism remained the guiding principle.¹²⁶ Similarly, there was no radical change in the policy on gambling. As Virginia Thompson put it, 'The constitutional regime inherited its predecessor's confusing and unrealistic attitude towards gambling, namely, that it was demoralizing if for private benefit but harmless if the State used the proceeds to finance public works.'¹²⁷ In this respect, it is telling that the People's Party gave approval to the Siamese Red Cross lottery within two months of coming to power.¹²⁸ However, the new regime was to go much further in promoting state-sponsored gambling and suppressing private gaming than the absolute monarchy ever had.

¹²⁶ Wyatt, *Thailand*, p. 239; Ingram, *Economic Change*, pp. 191, 329.

¹²⁷ Thompson, *Thailand*, p. 696.

¹²⁸ NA (2) SR.0201.101/1, 'President of People's Committee to Minister of the Interior, 11 Aug. 1932'.

From the outset, state-run lotteries were a key component of the new government's plans for the economic development of the country. In early 1933, Pridi submitted his 'Outline Economic Plan' to the National Assembly.¹²⁹ Influenced by European socialist thought, to which he had been exposed during his studies in Paris, this plan was an expression of Pridi's belief that the state should play a central role in fostering economic progress. Tucked in amongst proposals for the voluntary nationalisation of all land and state-led industrialisation was the suggestion for a national lottery.¹³⁰ Pridi justified it as follows:

Although a lottery is a form of gambling and risk taking, the gain or loss for the risk taker is only a small amount.... Concerning the organization of a lottery in this way, some Thai people are sensitive to criticism for promoting gambling. But please see the example in France where the *Credit National* bonds to raise money for rebuilding the country which had been destroyed in war, were bonds of a type which also provided a lottery for the bondholders. In Britain itself there are horse racing courses and there are many British people who like horse racing. But we have no wish to go that far. We wish only a lottery which people can play in small amounts but have an opportunity to make a lot of money.¹³¹

In brief, the use of gambling as a revenue source by Western states legitimised the promotion of lotteries by the Siamese state.

The more radical proposals in Pridi's plan caused a wave of controversy and sparked a political struggle, both within the People's Party and between the new regime and the old, royalist one. From this, the military faction of the People's Party emerged as the dominant force. Prajadhipok was enlisted in denouncing the plan and he wrote a highly critical commentary in which he likened Pridi to Stalin; the only point of which he approved was the introduction of a lottery.¹³² The plan was rejected, the Assembly suspended and Pridi sent into brief exile. In spite of this, the

¹²⁹ For a complete translation of the plan, see Pridi Banomyong, *Pridi by Pridi: Selected Writings on Life, Politics, and Economy*, trans. Chris Baker and Pasuk Phongpaichit, Chiang Mai: Silkworm Books, 2000, pp. 83-123.

¹³⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 100, 120.

¹³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 123 n. 10.

¹³² *Ibid.*, p. 63; Baker and Pasuk, *Thailand*, p. 120.

idea of a state-run lottery was taken up with enthusiasm. It is worth noting that many European governments had recently lifted restrictions on lotteries; France, for instance, reintroduced government lotteries in 1933.¹³³ This lent additional legitimacy to the Siamese government's scheme. While there may have been doubts about the wisdom of encouraging gambling, even for charitable purposes, previous experience had shown that if the state was not going to provide an outlet for gambling, other interests, legal or illegal, would take advantage of the gap in the market. Then Financial Adviser, James Baxter, provided a neat summary of the government's approach: 'Since it would... appear that the Siamese are ardent devotees of the Goddess of Chance and will not be denied access to Her shrine, public interest would seem to lie in the Cult being guided, controlled and exploited by the State.'¹³⁴

In April 1933, a committee was set up to organise the first state lottery, the proceeds of which would be used to develop education and health care.¹³⁵ The plan was to experiment with a single one million baht lottery, with tickets at one baht each, in the first year. Rather than having just a few large prizes, the government decided to have many smaller ones as well, in order to strengthen the lottery's appeal, encourage sales and ensure a large number of winners.¹³⁶ If it proved a success, it would become a regular affair and its frequency might be increased. Although it was plagued by a number of problems – delays in the printing of tickets, difficulties distributing them in the provinces, accusations of official negligence, and disrupted tickets sales due to the royalist rebellion led by Prince Boworadet during October and November 1933 –

¹³³ Munting, *Economic and Social History*, p. 36.

¹³⁴ NA K Kh.0301.1.3/11, 'Subject:- Issue of Lotteries by Public Authorities, 30 June 1934'.

¹³⁵ NA (2) SR.0201.101/5, 'Cabinet Secretary to Minister of the Interior, 18 April 1933'.

¹³⁶ There were 383 prizes amounting to 500,000 baht in total. These ranged from a first prize of 80,000 baht to 250 prizes of 400 baht each. See NA (2) SR.0201.101/5, 'Report of meeting of committee for laying down framework for lottery in aid of education and health care, 1 May 1933'; 'PM to Chao Phraya Mukkhamontri, 2 June 1933'; 'System for issuing first state lottery'; 'Mukkhamontri to Phraya Mano'; 'Report of state lottery committee meeting, 12 June 1933'.

and the expenses were much more than anticipated, the first lottery was deemed enough of a success for more to be organised.¹³⁷ Even before it was drawn on 8 April 1934, preparations were being made for the next one million baht extravaganza. With the government planning to reduce the rate of the capitation tax in 1934/5, the expressed aim of these lotteries was to make good the revenue shortfall.¹³⁸ Significantly, to ensure that all tickets were sold and the state lotteries were a success, it was decided that other organisations would be prevented from issuing their own lotteries.¹³⁹

In a sense, government gambling policy had come full circle since the days of Chulalongkorn. When he started the closure of the gambling houses, the revenue basis of the Siamese state shifted from indirect to direct taxation. In the depressed economic climate of the mid-1930s, the constitutional government partly reversed this process in order to alleviate the hardship being felt by the Siamese population. Lotteries allowed the government to reduce the direct tax burden on the population, and thereby win popular support, while also raising income for much-needed infrastructure projects. The crucial difference was that the government was no longer dependent on tax farmers to operate gambling ventures and collect the revenue. The state had evolved to the point where it could undertake these tasks itself. Moreover, lotteries were to be a monopoly of the state, no competitors were tolerated. Thus, when the Siamese Red Cross, which was still experiencing financial difficulties,

¹³⁷ NA (2) SR.0201.101/5, 'Mukkhamontri to PM, 18 Sept. 1933'; 'Mukkhamontri to Cabinet Secretary, 1 Nov. 1933'; NA (2) SR.0201.101/6, 'Minister of Finance to PM, 8 June 1934'.

¹³⁸ NA K Kh.0301.1.3/10, 'D. G. of Revenue's Memo on State Lottery Scheme B. E. 2477 to S. C. Finance dated 2nd Jan. B. E. "76 [1934]'.

¹³⁹ NA (2) SR.0201.101/6, 'Minister of Finance to PM, 25 Jan. 1934'; 'Cabinet Secretary to Minister of Finance, 15 Feb. 1934'.

asked for permission to conduct another lottery, it was refused, though it was informed that it might request a share of the proceeds from the state lottery.¹⁴⁰

Tickets for the second state lottery went on sale from 13 April 1934 and sold out within four months. One significant innovation was 100 baht prizes for all tickets that shared the same three final figures as the winning ticket. This meant there were over 1,000 prizes in total. Moreover, winning tickets were evenly distributed throughout the country; when the results were issued on 17 August 1934 only two provinces did not have a winner. Total profits were over 440,000 baht.¹⁴¹ No sooner had the results been issued than tickets for the next lottery that year went on sale; the draw was scheduled for December 1934.¹⁴² Regular state lotteries were to become a permanent fixture and the state was using gambling once more to provide a steady income. Such was their popularity among the population and their profitability for the government that in 1939 the Phibun Songkhram government set up the Lottery Office to conduct monthly lotteries. These have continued to the present day, going twice monthly in 1989.¹⁴³

Besides the official state lottery, the new regime initiated another in 1933: the Constitution Celebration lottery. The proceeds from this were to cover the costs of the countrywide festivities for Constitution Day on 10 December 1933. Any surplus funds would be used to distribute copies of the constitution.¹⁴⁴ Two sets of 150,000 tickets each, one probably just for sale in Bangkok and the other with a wider distribution, were issued in November 1933 and the results were drawn on 11 and 12

¹⁴⁰ NA (2) SR.0201.101/12, 'Chairman of the Siamese Red Cross to Phraya Phahon, 12 March 1934'.

¹⁴¹ On the framework and organisation of this lottery, see NA K Kh.0301.1.3/10, 'D. G. of Revenue's Memo on State Lottery Scheme B. E. 2477 to S. C. Finance dated 2nd Jan. B. E. "76 [1934]'; NA (2) SR.0201.101/6, 'Report on issuing million baht state lottery (1st occasion), B. E. 2477'.

¹⁴² NA (2) SR.0201.101/6, 'Cabinet Secretary to Minister of the Interior, 9 June 1934'.

¹⁴³ Pasuk et al., *Guns, Girls, Gambling, Ganja*, p. 48.

¹⁴⁴ Celebrations were held in 67 provinces. NA (2) SR.0201.101/8, 'President of the Constitution Celebration lottery committee to Cabinet Secretary, 18 Nov. 1933'; 'Cabinet Secretary to Minister of the Interior, 6 Jan. 1934'.

December. Demand was so great that the second set sold out within four days.¹⁴⁵ There were also reports of people selling them for more than their stated price of one baht.¹⁴⁶ Total profits amounted to almost 100,000 baht.¹⁴⁷ But the Constitution Celebration lottery did not have only a fundraising purpose. Having brought an end to monarchical absolutism, the People's Party used constitutionalism as the basis for rationalising and legitimising its rule.¹⁴⁸ Moreover, it sought to remove the king as the central component in the pre-existing state ideology – the 'holy trinity' of Nation, Religion, and King – that formed the bedrock of Siamese identity and the unity of the Siamese nation. A fourth element, the constitution, was now promoted as the guarantor of Siamese independence and progress.¹⁴⁹ Making the constitution a focus of public loyalty was thus imperative for the new government. However, for most of the population, a constitution – in Thai *ratthathammanun* – was an alien idea of which they had only a shaky understanding. Apparently, some even thought *ratthathammanun* was a relation of Phraya Phahon, the prime minister from June 1933 to September 1938.¹⁵⁰ During the Constitution Day celebrations, people were encouraged to make offerings to copies of the constitution, which was presented as a sacred entity to which even the king was subordinate.¹⁵¹ By the mid-1930s,

¹⁴⁵ NA (2) SR.0201.101/10, 'President of the Constitution Celebration lottery committee, 2nd instance, to Minister of Finance, Dec. 1933'.

¹⁴⁶ NA (2) SR.0201.101/8, 'President of the Constitution Celebration lottery committee to Cabinet Secretary, 25 Nov. 1933'.

¹⁴⁷ NA (2) SR.0201.101/8, 'President of the Constitution Celebration lottery committee, 1st instance, to Cabinet Secretary, 29 Dec. 1933'; NA (2) SR.0201.101/10, 'President of the Constitution Celebration lottery committee, 2nd instance, to Cabinet Secretary, 10 Jan. 1934'.

¹⁴⁸ Chai-anan Samudavanija, 'State-Identity Creation, State-Building and Civil Society, 1939-1989' in Craig J. Reynolds (ed.), *National Identity and Its Defenders: Thailand Today*, revised ed., Chiang Mai: Silkwood, 2002, p. 51.

¹⁴⁹ As Pridi explained in a radio broadcast on the fourth anniversary of the coup: 'The constitution is the highest dhamma to enable the Siamese people to survive as an independent nation.' See Pridi, *Pridi*, p. 196. Similarly, the chief ideologue of the new regime, Luang Wichit Wathakan, proclaimed: 'Let everybody be confident that this constitution will bring progress and happiness to our country. We must make our constitution secure as it is the basis of our nation.' Quoted in Barmé, *Luang Wichit Wathakan*, p. 109.

¹⁵⁰ Wyatt, *Thailand*, p. 239.

¹⁵¹ Barmé, *Luang Wichit Wathakan*, pp. 111-13.

Constitution Day had been turned into the premier national holiday, complete with beauty contests, musical concerts and parades. Constitution Celebration lotteries also became regular fixtures, and these served to generate public interest.¹⁵² Even the lottery tickets were an integral part of the strategy for familiarising people with the constitution and sacralising it. Each bore an image of the constitution, resting on a pedestal, with rays of light emanating from it, suggesting enlightenment (see Figure 3.6a for an example ticket for the first Constitution Celebration lottery and Figure 3.6b for one, bearing an image of the recently completed Democracy Monument, for 1940 lottery). In short, this lottery had a political purpose as well as a financial one.



Figures 3.6a and b: Constitution Celebration Lottery tickets (Source: Anek, *A Century of Thai Design*, p. 65)

¹⁵² Constitution Celebration lotteries were held intermittently up to 1956. Anake Nawigamune (comp.), *A Century of Thai Graphic Design*, London: Thames and Hudson, 2000, p. 65.

The endorsement and promotion of lotteries by the central government inspired local authorities to organise them as well in aid of local development projects. The first request came in early 1934 from the MP for Ratchaburi, who identified improving that province's communications infrastructure as the top priority.¹⁵³ Because it lacked the funds to carry out such a project, the Cabinet approved the proposal but with the condition that tickets could be sold only within Ratchaburi province.¹⁵⁴ A wave of similar requests from other MPs followed but these were all denied. The Cabinet was concerned that a proliferation of such lotteries might lead to administrative confusion.¹⁵⁵ Given the central government's plans to expand the scope of the state lotteries in the year 1934/5, these refusals presumably also stemmed from fears of competition. However, the Ministry of the Interior did not object to provincial lotteries as such, so long as they were centrally organised. In July 1934, the Cabinet gave the Ministry of the Interior permission to issue lotteries to raise capital for the establishment of municipal authorities in every province.¹⁵⁶ Taking up some earlier proposals of Prajadhipok for more representative government at the local level, the constitutional regime had issued the Municipality Act in 1933.¹⁵⁷ This was designed to give local people a greater say in the administration of their own provinces and the Ministry of the Interior began to implement the act in 1935/6. To support the country's seventy-odd municipal governments, two types of municipal lottery (*chalak kinbaeng thesaban*) were established: monthly ones of 200,000 baht a time in aid of particular provinces, the tickets of which could be sold

¹⁵³ NA (2) SR.0201.101/2, 'Nai Kim Seng to Minister of the Interior, 10 Feb. 1934'.

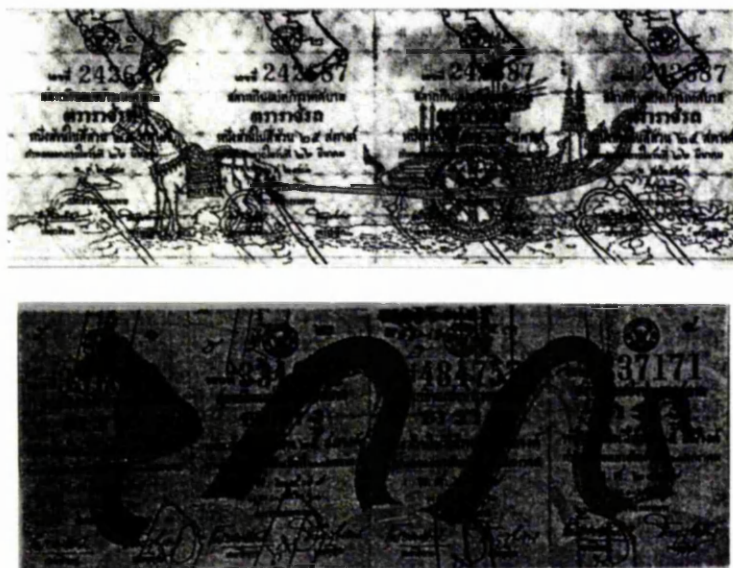
¹⁵⁴ NA (2) SR.0201.101/2, 'Cabinet Secretary to Minister of the Interior, 17 Feb. and 7 March 1934'.

¹⁵⁵ NA (2) SR.0201.101/7, 'MP for Samut Sakhon to Phahon, 27 Feb. 1934'; 'Cabinet Secretary to MP for Samut Sakhon, 21 March 1934'; 'Cabinet Secretary to Nai Sanit Charoenrat, 15 March 1934'; 'Cabinet Secretary to Luang Sri Prakat, 22 March 1934'.

¹⁵⁶ NA (2) SR.0201.101/13, 'Report of meeting laying down the framework for 1st municipal lotteries, B. E. 2477'.

¹⁵⁷ For Prajadhipok's proposals on municipal governments, see Batson, *End of the Absolute Monarchy*, pp. 139-41.

only in that province; and countrywide ones to the value of one million baht that were issued every four months (for example tickets of this second type see Figures 3.7a and b).¹⁵⁸ Proceeds from this second type went into a central fund that was then shared amongst all the provinces for building municipal offices, provincial hospitals, schools, wells, and sports stadia.¹⁵⁹ It is ironic that something designed to enable more representative local government should be so strictly controlled by the central state. But it shows just how protective the state was of its ability to tap people's gambling instincts to fund public works.



Figures 3.7a and b: Municipal Lottery tickets (Source: Anek, *A Century of Thai Design*, p. 65)

To sum up, within a few years of the 1932 coup, the constitutional government had set up a system of lotteries that in their purpose, size, and scope surpassed those that had been organised during the 1920s. Indeed, the various state-run lotteries were an integral part of the new regime's plans for the economic,

¹⁵⁸ NA (2) SR.0201.101/13, 'Report of meeting laying down the framework for 1st municipal lotteries, B. E. 2477'.

¹⁵⁹ NA (2) SR.0201.101/13, 'Minister of the Interior to PM, 8 Nov. 1935'.

administrative, and educational development of the country. The provision that winning tickets in the state lottery were evenly distributed throughout the country made this a truly national event. The structure of the municipal lotteries, meanwhile, emphasised the individuality of each province but as a unit within a much greater national whole. Lastly, the Constitution Celebration lotteries served to raise public awareness of and, possibly, loyalty to the new pillar of state authority. In short, the state lotteries were a tool for nation-building.

The Monte Carlo of the Far East

The People's Party had come to power with the support of the business community and, initially at least, it was more accommodating than the absolute monarchy had been towards companies establishing gaming ventures for profit. In the early years of the constitutional era, there were numerous requests to establish enterprises such as bingo halls; one businessman even agitated for permission to re-establish the *huai* lottery. Applications stressed how the country would benefit economically through the creation of jobs and in taxes paid to the government, though not all were successful.¹⁶⁰ Places such as the Suan S'nuk (*suan sanuk*) entertainment hall, which offered fairground-style gambling games and bingo, but no cash prizes, sprang up in Bangkok.¹⁶¹ The more liberal government attitude towards gambling was reflected in the sharp increase in revenue from license fees, from around 400,000 baht a year during the last years of the absolute monarchy to just under one million baht in 1933/4 and then to almost 1.7 million baht in 1934/5.¹⁶² One idea that was frequently

¹⁶⁰ For bingo halls see NA (2) SR.0201.31/1, 'Nai Song Rattanaphlin to Phraya Mano, 15 Feb. 1933'; Nai Maen Makhaburut to Phraya Mano, 25 March 1933'. The request to run *huai*-style lotteries was denied. NA (2) SR.0201.31/2, 'Phra Anuwat Ratchaniyom to the Cabinet, 6 March 1933'; 'Cabinet Secretary to Anuwat, 6 Jan. 1934'.

¹⁶¹ *BTWM*, 19 May 1934.

¹⁶² *SY* 1937-38 & 1938-39, p. 280.

touted – in the government, business circles, and the press – was the creation of Western-style casinos and the transformation of Siam into ‘the Monte Carlo of the Far East’.¹⁶³ Although this was not the first time the example of Monte Carlo was brought up, it seems to have particularly excited the public imagination in the mid-1930s. Literate Siamese would have been familiar with Monte Carlo and its casinos through their portrayal in travelogues, essays, and Arkartdamkeung Rapheephat’s 1929 hit novel, *Lakhon haeng chiwit* (The Circus of Life) in particular.¹⁶⁴ Although Arkart does not hold back in detailing some of the grim realities of the city, the overall impression of Monte Carlo is of a sophisticated locale in which the rich and famous rub shoulders. The novel’s protagonist, a Thai man called Wisoot who works as an overseas journalist, meets and interviews an array of luminaries, including Edgar Wallace, George Bernard Shaw and the American millionaire Vanderbilt.¹⁶⁵ While most of these people would have been unfamiliar to the average Siamese reader, the name-dropping would have enhanced the glamorous image of Monte Carlo and, by association, casinos. Among certain parts of Siamese society the casino was identified as a symbol of modernity and *siwilai*.

Casinos certainly had the support of powerful elements within the new political elite, who saw them as a mechanism for promoting economic development and tourism. In March 1934, Phibun suggested building a casino on the island of Ko Si Chang, one of the country’s main ports. Because large ships were unable to pass upstream to Bangkok, the island was an unloading point for cargo and was often host

¹⁶³ *BTWM*, 19 May 1934.

¹⁶⁴ Chulalongkorn visited Monte Carlo on his two trips to Europe, first in 1897 and again in 1907. His impressions and those of his retinue are included in Phraya Si Sahathep (Seng Wiriyasi), *Chotmai het sadet praphat yurop r. s. 116* [Records of the royal visit to Europe in 1897], Bangkok: Khrusapha, 1997, p. 487 and King Chulalongkorn, *Klai ban* [Far from home], vol. 1, Bangkok: Sophonphiphanthathanakan, 1923/4, pp. 184–92. See also Thongchai, ‘Quest for “Siwilai”’, pp. 537–40.

¹⁶⁵ Arkartdamkeung Rapheebat, *The Circus of Life*, trans. Phongdeit Jiangphattanarket and ed. Marcel Barang, Bangkok: Modern Thai Classics, 1995, pp. 194–6. Arkart travelled to Europe in 1924 and then went on to the United States.

to large numbers of sailors. A casino would provide them with entertainment, increase state revenues and help develop the port.¹⁶⁶ When the company that managed Suan S'nuk learnt of Phibun's proposal, it offered to take on the project and transform the island into a tourist resort. Alongside the Monte Carlo-style casino where Western games such as roulette and baccarat would be played, its plans included building a hotel, a harbour, tennis courts, a golf course and swimming pool to attract foreign visitors.¹⁶⁷ Shortly after, the Ministry of Economic Affairs suggested the creation of a public corporation, in which the government would hold the majority of shares, to manage a casino in the royal coastal resort of Hua Hin. It would also stage horse-racing meetings.¹⁶⁸ Around the same time, a former government minister and his associates formed a company to establish the 'Little Heaven' (*muang sawan noi*) casino in Bangkok. This met with fierce public opposition and permission was refused.¹⁶⁹ Similarly, neither of the first two proposals seem to have got off the ground.

Despite these setbacks, the proponents of casinos received a boost when the Gambling Act B. E. 2478 was promulgated in January 1936. This law will be discussed more fully in the next section but for now it should be noted that Section 4 allowed for casinos, in which any game specified in List A (banned games) could be played.¹⁷⁰ This provision provoked heated debate when the draft law was given its second reading in the Assembly. Despite objections that casinos would be the ruin of the Siamese population, the key argument in their favour was that since gambling was a part of human nature, it was better that it was confined to certain areas and that the government derive some revenue from it. Moreover, restrictions could be imposed to

¹⁶⁶ NA (2) SR.0201.31/3, 'Report of Cabinet meeting, 9 March 1934'.

¹⁶⁷ NA (2) SR.0201.31/4, 'Phraya Khathathonbodi to Phahon, 20 March 1934'.

¹⁶⁸ NA (2) SR.0201.31/6, 'Minister of Economic Affairs to PM, 22 May 1934'.

¹⁶⁹ Thompson, *Thailand*, p. 696; *BTWM*, 25 May 1934.

¹⁷⁰ *PKPS*, 48, p. 1773.

prevent certain classes of people from entering these casinos. Perhaps another deciding factor was the existence of casinos on the kingdom's borders; these led to Siamese nationals leaving the country to play and a flight of capital.¹⁷¹ In sum, the advantages outweighed the potential harmful effects, which in any case could be mitigated.

It was not until Phibun became Prime Minister in December 1938 that the idea of establishing casinos was fully realised. In April 1939, a royal decree was issued that laid down the framework for government-run casinos. It allowed for the playing of any games on the prohibited list within the premises, empowering the Minister of Finance to choose which games in particular and also to issue regulations prohibiting certain classes of people from entering. The admission fee was fixed at no more than 20 baht a day, though for foreigners who had all the required documentation – passports, registration certificates or such like – it was only 2 baht. Lastly, the government was entitled to accept tenders for the right to operate either all or part of the games played inside.¹⁷² Clearly, the high entrance fees for the local population were designed to exclude the poorer segments of Siamese society. Attending one of the government-run casinos was meant only for the wealthy.

On 3 May 1939, the first establishment was opened in the seaside town of Hua Hin. The opening was a grand affair, attended by a number of important government officials, including Pridi as the Minister of Finance, members of the royal family and other notables. One of the opening speeches stated the rationale for casinos as follows:

¹⁷¹ The MP for Ubon Ratchathani gave the example of people in his constituency crossing the border into French Indochina to gamble in the town of Pakse in southern Laos. For the complete discussions, see *Rai-ngan kanprachum sapha phuthaen ratsadon samai ti 2 saman p. s. 2478* [Assembly Records, 1935/6], Bangkok: Office of the Parliamentary Secretary, pp. 2053-82.

¹⁷² *PKPS*, 52, pp. 88-91.

Though a Casino is a place for forms of gambling, yet it is based on strict methods, quite different from the gambling houses of former times. This Casino has as its aim the promotion of tourist traffic, which is a means of attracting money from foreign parts in the country and at the same time it prevents the export of money.¹⁷³

It was generally acknowledged that the Hua Hin casino was not ideally placed to attract tourists.¹⁷⁴ But as Pridi explained it was an experiment, with the government planning to open further casinos in the south close to the border with Malaya in the near future.¹⁷⁵ During the first week, admission fees were kept low to attract customers, though most of these appeared to be from Bangkok.¹⁷⁶ There seems to have been a distinct lack of Westerners.¹⁷⁷ Perhaps unsurprisingly, the experiment seems to have been a failure. Not long after opening, the casino was temporarily closed, though it never seems to have been reopened.¹⁷⁸

In spite of this initial setback, the government did not abandon its casino project, opening one in Hat Yai in late 1939, with more to follow. Described as having 'real Monte Carlo settings and atmosphere', games included roulette, baccarat, and some old Siamese favourites. There was also a cabaret 'with charming Thai hostesses', an orchestra, a 'first class' bar, and restaurant.¹⁷⁹ By locating the casino so close to Malaya, where gambling was confined to horse-racing, the government hoped it might attract large numbers of Malaysians, particularly Chinese. Given the downturn in the Malayan tin and rubber industries, however, the *Malaya Tribune* thought this unduly optimistic.¹⁸⁰ Besides encouraging tourism, the casino was intended to provide alternative revenue sources to replace that lost through the

¹⁷³ Quoted in *BTWM*, 4 May 1939.

¹⁷⁴ *BTWM*, 2 May 1939.

¹⁷⁵ *BTWM*, 6 May 1939.

¹⁷⁶ *BTWM*, 4 May 1939.

¹⁷⁷ A photo taken at the casino showed only two Westerners among all the guests. Landon, *Chinese In Thailand*, p. 90.

¹⁷⁸ Commenting on the closure in September 1939, the *Bangkok Times* stated it did not know the present position. *BTWM*, 28 Sept. 1939.

¹⁷⁹ *BTWM*, 28 Jan. 1940.

¹⁸⁰ Article reproduced in *BTWM*, 15 May 1939.

abolition of direct forms of taxation such as the land and capitation taxes.¹⁸¹ This was part of Pridi's extensive tax reforms, manifested by the enactment of the country's first revenue code in March 1939, which attempted to shift the tax burden from the rice farmer onto business and other high-income groups in pursuit of a more equitable society.¹⁸² The Hat Yai casino had a promising start. During January and February 1940, attendance was around one thousand people a day, rising to two thousand over the Chinese New Year. Most of the gamblers were Chinese labourers from the nearby tin and rubber plantations and Malays from across the border. Few Thais were present.¹⁸³ Moreover, between January and March, the casino recorded profits of between 90,000 and 100,000 baht per month; the expected profits for the whole year were one million baht.¹⁸⁴ From 1 April 1940, however, the casino was temporarily closed. According to Pridi, this was due to the war in Europe, which hampered the tourist trade and the flow of money into Siam; the casino would be reopened once conditions returned to normal.¹⁸⁵ The *Bangkok Times*, meanwhile, attributed the closure to the fact that too many Thais and not enough foreigners frequented the casino.¹⁸⁶ As with the Hua Hin establishment, it seems to have never been reopened.

The casino project was given one last roll of the dice during the last years of the Second World War. The first Khuang Aphaiwong government (1 August 1944 to 31 August 1945) opened casinos throughout Bangkok and in some other provinces in order to 'tax' wartime profiteers. These were supposed to be exclusively for the rich but in reality were open to all. Predictably, it was said that the casinos encouraged gambling and the general population began to experience greater hardship and

¹⁸¹ *BTWM*, 20 March 1940. On the abolition of the capitation and land taxes see Pridi, *Pridi*, p. 181; and Baker and Pasuk, *Thailand*, p. 88.

¹⁸² Ingram, *Economic Change*, p. 184; Pridi, *Pridi*, p. 181.

¹⁸³ *BTWM*, 22 Feb. 1940.

¹⁸⁴ *BTWM*, 20 March 1940.

¹⁸⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁸⁶ *BTWM*, 28 May 1940.

poverty. Under mounting criticism from the press and the public, the Khuang Aphaiwong government shut all the casinos on 10 June 1945.¹⁸⁷ Despite the revenue it provided, the casino experiment had been a failure, primarily because the government was unable to attract the 'right' clientele – whether foreign tourists or wealthy Thais – or to exclude the majority of the population that could ill afford to gamble. When a private company subsequently proposed to open a casino in Phuket for a five-year period, offering 100,000 baht advance payments annually, the government refused permission, claiming it had no policy of opening any further establishments. The constitutional regime's flirtation with casinos was over.

Tightening the Grip

The establishment of state lotteries and government-run casinos was just one aspect of the constitutional regime's policy on gambling. For these enterprises to be successful, the government needed to ensure there was an enthusiastic market for them and that any competition, legal or illegal, was blunted. As the *Bangkok Times* observed: 'The Government does not need to be told that the State revenue will always be greater and more certain if the gambling craze can be kept under strict control.'¹⁸⁸ Between 1932 and 1945, the regulations and restrictions on many forms of gambling were progressively tightened. In early 1933, for instance, book-making at race meetings was prohibited.¹⁸⁹ In so doing, the government hoped to squeeze some forms out of existence and so encourage people to play those that provided the state with the greatest revenue. Government policy was thus more redirection than restriction. However, such a strategy ran the risk of forcing people to gamble

¹⁸⁷ Thanongsak, [Laws about gambling], pp. 80-1; *Thai mai*, 1 June 1945.

¹⁸⁸ *BTWM*, 19 May 1934.

¹⁸⁹ *BTWM*, 15 March 1933.

illegally. Moreover, the government's promotion of lotteries and casinos fuelled the gambling problem since it gave implicit approval to gambling in itself.

The government's approach to card-playing provides a good illustration of these tensions. The provision that allowed people to play cards for entertainment purposes between friends and family without a permit was clearly open to divergent interpretations and abuse, particularly in the definition of a 'friend'.¹⁹⁰ Moreover, given the economic problems of the early 1930s and the new regime's commitment to lowering direct taxation, it can be surmised that the government was no longer willing to forgo the lucrative income from card permits. In June 1933, therefore, the second edition of the ministerial regulations for the 1930 law came into force, annulling the provision for card playing without a license. Perhaps to compensate for this cancellation, permit fees were reduced from 20 baht a day per circle to 6 baht.¹⁹¹ This may partially account for the sharp rise in revenue from license fees, referred to earlier, during the first half of the 1930s. In turn, this increase implies that the revised regulations did little to diminish people's appetite for cards. Indeed, they may have been counterproductive, inadvertently creating a larger market for card dens, the operating costs of which were significantly reduced by the lower permit fees. In 1934, officials reported that people were setting up cards dens along almost every road and alley in Bangkok. Items of clothing, wooden signs and bamboo blinds would be hung outside these premises to indicate to passers-by that gambling was going on inside. The Ministry of the Interior considered a range of measures to restrict the issuing of permits but the Ministry of Finance was sceptical as to their effectiveness. It doubted

¹⁹⁰ In 1932, for instance, the Public Prosecutor for Singburi petitioned the Supreme Court (*san dika*) about an illegal gambling case, claiming that some of the defendants could not be friends because they had met only on the day they played cards together. The Supreme Court dismissed the appeal on grounds of invalidity. 'Ruling No. 123/2475', *Thammasan*, 16, pp. 96-7. See also 'Ruling No. 454/2475, *Thammasan*, pp. 391-2.

¹⁹¹ The only card game that remained exempt was bridge, probably as a concession to resident Westerners. For the complete regulations, see *PKPS*, 46, pp. 125-6.

that greater restriction would really reduce card playing but was sure the government would lose revenue from card permits without any appreciable benefit. It boiled down to whether the new regime was to continue the policy of suppressing gambling or wished to exploit it for revenue purposes once more.¹⁹² The Cabinet came down firmly on the side of suppression and the Ministry of the Interior issued a series of guidelines for the granting of permits; officials were instructed to conduct thorough investigations into the backgrounds and intentions of people applying for licenses.¹⁹³

Gambling at festivals and temple fairs, such as that at the Golden Mount in Bangkok, was also brought under stricter control. As already mentioned, local authorities and temples had long allowed gambling at such events in order to raise money. A range of illegal practices had sprung up around these gambling operations: stallholders commonly altered the methods of play to make their games more appealing to the public, and got round the prohibition on cash prizes by allowing winners to exchange the articles they won for money, or to use these prizes as a future stake. More seriously, individuals who had received the monopoly rights for the gaming stalls would auction them to others for large profits, in clear violation of the law.¹⁹⁴ All of these illicit practices were on display at the Nakhon Pathom festival, an annual event held around the great Buddhist stupa in the town, in November 1934. As usual the *Bangkok Times* attributed the large crowds to the opportunity to gamble. The police were kept busy closing down gaming stalls that broke the law, eventually shutting them all down, by which time it was estimated that over 20,000 people had entered the gambling enclosure. Despite the police action, both the stallholders and

¹⁹² NA (2) SR.0201.31/5, 'Minister of the Interior to Cabinet Secretary, 19 Oct. 1934'.

¹⁹³ NA (2) SR.0201.31/5, 'Minister of the Interior to Cabinet Secretary, 19 Dec. 1934'; *Thesaphiban*, 34, pp. 1448-9; 35, pp. 1040-1.

¹⁹⁴ *Thesaphiban*, 34, p. 1011.

the monopolists were reported to have made healthy profits.¹⁹⁵ Just days after this festival finished, the Ministry of the Interior issued regulations to stop these abuses. With the exception of the forthcoming celebrations for Constitution Day, permission for gambling games during festive occasions was suspended until the gambling law could be amended. Only games of skill such as target-shooting or throwing hoops over prizes were to be allowed. Moreover, stallholders were to be vetted by licensing officials and required to pay a security, which would not be returned should they contravene the law or conditions of their permit.¹⁹⁶ These measures seem to have brought an end to large-scale gambling at some public events. Indeed, the Nakon Pathom festival the following year was marked by the complete absence of gambling.¹⁹⁷

In 1935, the constitutional regime began discussions on a new gambling law. Once again, the idea of prohibiting all forms of gambling except for those specified in the act was considered, leading to extensive discussions within the National Assembly.¹⁹⁸ But, as in the past, this principle was rejected. The usual objections and problems were raised. Banning all gambling games without specifying their names or their nature would lead to numerous difficulties in defining what exactly constituted gambling; one MP claimed that playing billiards for a bottle of beer might be breaking the law, for instance. Perhaps the decisive factor, however, was the fact that forbidding all forms of gambling was in direct opposition to established legal

¹⁹⁵ *BTWM*, 24 Nov. 1934.

¹⁹⁶ *Thesaphiban*, 34, p. 1012-15.

¹⁹⁷ *BTWM*, 11 Nov. 1935.

¹⁹⁸ For the complete discussions on this, see *Rai-ngan kanprachum sapha phuthaen ratsadon samai ti 2 saman p. s. 2478* [Assembly Records, 1935/6], Bangkok: Office of the Parliamentary Secretary, pp. 2031-53.

principles, specifically, that people had to be given a reasonable chance to know what was illegal before they could be held to account for breaking the law.¹⁹⁹

The Gambling Act B. E. 2478 was issued in January 1936.²⁰⁰ In essence, it was little different from the 1930 law, though updated to include all the changes since the 1932 coup outlined above. Alongside some additions and modifications to the forbidden list (List A) and that for games permitted subject to license (List B), the legal age for gambling – except on lotteries – was raised from 16 to 20. The most significant changes were to the penalties for gambling offences. Running any of the first sixteen games on the prohibited list was now punishable with a prison sentence of three months to three years *and* a fine ranging from 500 to 5,000 baht. For the first time, organisers of games such as *po pan* or three-stick trick were faced with a guaranteed jail sentence if found guilty. As for the players (*luk kha*) of these games, there was a maximum sentence of three years or fine of 5,000 baht or both. Playing any of the other games on either list was subject to a sentence of up to two years or a fine not exceeding 2,000 baht.²⁰¹ Whereas the 1930 law had left sentencing to judicial discretion, the 1936 act gave clear parameters and re-established the differential between playing forbidden games and playing permitted ones illegally. The 1936 law remains in force in present day Thailand, though it and its accompanying ministerial regulations have been regularly updated to reflect inflation and to cover new ways of

¹⁹⁹ Ibid., p. 2045.

²⁰⁰ For the complete act, see *PKPS*, 48, pp. 1772-81.

²⁰¹ This reduction in the maximum fine, from 5,000 under the 1930 law, may have bucked the trend for heavier penalties but it was a practical measure. The misdemeanour courts in Bangkok (*san porisapha*) had recently been changed to district courts (*san khwaeng*), which could only impose a maximum fine of 2,000 baht. The tariff for minor gambling offences was therefore lowered in order to avoid having to send these cases to the Criminal Court. See *Rai-ngan kanprachum sapha phuthaen ratsadon samai ti 2 saman p. s. 2478* [Assembly Records, 1935/6], Bangkok: Office of the Parliamentary Secretary, p. 2022.

gambling, such as slot machines, which are forbidden, football tables and even pinball machines, both of which require a license.²⁰²

For some of the Siamese elite, the new law was not enough. One idea that had often been mooted was imposing restrictions on the possession, production, and import of gambling equipment.²⁰³ During the mid-1930s, two members of the National Assembly submitted draft legislation for the licensing of such equipment. Both reasoned this would aid the detection of illegal gambling and discourage legal gambling. Despite support from some members and an admission from the government that it had considered including similar measures in the 1936 law, neither draft was passed. Many objections and potential pitfalls were raised: it was impossible to regulate the equipment for all games because some used everyday items such as coins, matches or seeds; it was inappropriate to restrict equipment for legal games; it would encourage underground gambling; enforcing the law would place unreasonable demands upon officials; and such controls would infringe the rights of the people.²⁰⁴

Nevertheless, the government did not discard the idea of regulating some types of gambling equipment. Following the successful renegotiation during 1937 and 1938 of Siam's 'unequal' treaties with the Western powers, resulting in the restoration of the country's fiscal and judicial sovereignty, the government drafted a law for the control of playing cards. Under this legislation, the production, retail and import of playing cards would be illegal except under license from the Excise Department, which would also manufacture its own cards for sale. When Pridi

²⁰² See, for example, the 17th and 18th editions of the ministerial regulations in Lisut, [Gambling Handbook], pp. 11-29.

²⁰³ See for instance NA R.7 Kh.2/2, 'Ideas about suppressing gambling'.

²⁰⁴ For the discussions on each draft see *Rai-ngan kanprachum sapha phutaenratsadon samai ti 2 wisaman p. s. 2478*, vol. 2 [Assembly Records, 1935/36], Bangkok: Office of the Parliamentary Secretary, pp. 1103-10; *Rai-ngan kanprachum sapha phutaenratsadon samai ti 2 saman p. s. 2480*, vol. 2 [Assembly Records, 1937/38], Bangkok: Office of the Parliamentary Secretary, pp. 714-37.

introduced the draft to the Assembly, he made it clear that, besides restricting card playing, it was intended to create a new revenue source. This was in line with the government's policy of reducing and abolishing some forms of direct taxation and replacing them with indirect forms that would not trouble the population unduly. Such a frank admission led one MP to question the government's commitment to suppressing gambling. Indeed, he believed that printing government cards would encourage card playing. Pridi's response is interesting: he reaffirmed the restrictionist policy but also observed that the legislation would, at the very least, act as an indirect tax on illegal card playing.²⁰⁵ This was a tacit admission that, since the state's ability to suppress illegal gambling was limited, it was better that the government should profit from it in some way. The Playing Cards Act B. E. 2481 and accompanying ministerial regulations were promulgated in March 1939.²⁰⁶ Anyone wishing to import or sell cards required a license, which was valid for one year and cost up to 10 baht. The only cards anyone was allowed to keep in stock for sale were those made by the Excise Department or those that had been stamped by that agency, for which there was a fee. It was also illegal to possess printing blocks for cards without a permit. As a result of the Card Act, the Bangkok-based card manufacturers were forced to shut down and their printing presses were bought by the Excise Department. With a government investment of 180,000 baht, this department established its own printing house and began producing Thai, Chinese and Western cards in December 1939.²⁰⁷ Overseas manufacturers, meanwhile, were allowed to import no more than

²⁰⁵ For the complete discussions see *Rai-ngan kanprachum sapha phutaenratsadon samai ti 2 saman p. s. 2481*, vol. 2 [Assembly Records, 1938/39], Bangkok: Office of the Parliamentary Secretary, pp. 996-1042.

²⁰⁶ For the complete act and regulations see *PKPS*, 51, pp. 901-4, 938-9.

²⁰⁷ Anek, [Card Games], pp. 16-17.

200,000 packs a year.²⁰⁸ The production of playing cards was thereby transferred to government control and, just as with lotteries, the state assumed a virtual monopoly.

There were loopholes in the legislation, however, and these were ruthlessly exploited. During the Assembly sessions in September 1939, one MP reported how managers of card dens stockpiled large quantities of unstamped cards. When licensing officials tried to enforce the law, these managers took advantage of an omission in the card act to claim they were merely keeping the cards for the purpose of play, rather than for sale, and thus the cards did not require a stamp. Presumably, they sold these unstamped cards on the sly. The MP thus submitted a private members bill to close the loophole.²⁰⁹ The second edition of the Playing Cards Act B. E. 2481 was issued in November that year and this placed a limit on the amount of unstamped cards a person might possess.²¹⁰ Problems with implementation and enforcement clearly persisted, however, for in December 1943 the act was annulled and replaced by the Playing Card Act B. E. 2486. The import and sale of cards were more tightly regulated, with a greater distinction between retail and wholesale, and some additional offences prescribed.²¹¹

While the first Phibun government was responsible for establishing the country's first casinos, it also launched a vigorous clampdown on other forms of gambling, perhaps the most contentious being the prohibition on cock- and fish-fighting introduced in July 1939.²¹² As the quintessential pastime of the Siamese farmer, the prohibition on cockfighting was bound to cause resentment. No doubt in recognition of this, the Director-General of the Department of the Interior made a

²⁰⁸ Ibid., p. 19.

²⁰⁹ *Rai-ngan kanprachum sapha phutaenratsadon samai ti 2 saman p. s. 2482*, vol. 2 [Assembly Records, 1939/40], Bangkok: Office of the Parliamentary Secretary, pp. 727-9.

²¹⁰ *PKPS*, 52, pp. 1209-10

²¹¹ For the complete act and regulations see Lisut, [Handbook], pp. 373-7, 380-2.

²¹² *Thesaphiban*, 39, p. 1574.

radio address in which he gave four reasons for the ban.²¹³ Besides the standard criticisms that both games were cruel to animals – an extreme sin, no less – and that the free-flowing alcohol within the dens made them a hotbed of violence, the government justified its stance by referring to the pastimes' corrosive impact on family relationships and agricultural development. Barmé has illustrated how the constitutional regime took up the popular press' call for the promotion of women's rights and greater gender equality.²¹⁴ The critique of cock- and fish-fighting was framed within this discourse. According to the government, most men who raised cockerels or fish for these purposes were the heads of their households and neglected their families in favour of their animals, indeed, considered the latter to be more important. Their wives had to bear the burden of making a living alone while the children were left to their own devices. Prohibition would redress the balance. With regard to the agricultural side, rearing cockerels or fish for fighting was of little economic benefit and the government urged these men to focus on more profitable forms of animal husbandry. This prohibition must also be placed in the context of the Phibun regime's attempts to refashion the Siamese nation and Siamese culture through the issuing of the Cultural Mandates between 1939 and 1942. Their purpose was to encourage the perception that the country had left its royalist past behind and had entered the new age of the strong nation-state, a transformation potentially signified by the change of name from Siam to Thailand on 24 June 1939. In order to build a modern image for the country, certain Western modes of behaviour and dress – the wearing of hats and kissing one's wife before leaving for work, for instance – were officially encouraged, while some traditional customs which were considered

²¹³ NA (2) SR.0201.31/8, 'Explanation concerning the prohibition of fish-fighting and cockfighting'.

²¹⁴ Barmé, *Woman, Man, Bangkok*, pp. 232-3.

uncivilised – such as betel chewing – were proscribed.²¹⁵ Cockfighting and fish-fighting should also be viewed as targets of this policy. Similarly, in November 1939 Phibun made a radio broadcast in which he urged people to refrain from gambling on the street. Not only did it have a deleterious effect upon the players but on the nation as well: foreign visitors might think Thailand was a nation of inveterate gamblers and leave with an unfavourable impression of the country.²¹⁶

One last piece of legislation that merits attention was the third edition of the gambling law issued in 1942. This provided for heavier penalties for those convicted of illegal gambling within three years of having served a sentence or paid a fine for a previous gambling offence. If such an offender had originally been imprisoned and fined, then they would now face a penalty twice as severe. For those offenders who had originally been either imprisoned or fined, the penalty upon conviction for a second offence was imprisonment *and* a fine.²¹⁷ This was the culmination of a decades-long process whereby the penalties for illegal gambling had been progressively strengthened – from just a fine under the 1893 law to a guaranteed prison sentence for repeat offenders in 1942 – in a vain effort to deter would-be gamblers. That successive governments adopted an increasingly hard line indicates that the threat of punishment was an insufficient deterrent for large sections of the population.

The government's gambling policy during the first decade or so of the constitutional era was part of a modernisation project aimed at transforming the revenue basis of the Siamese state and remaking Siamese society. State lotteries and government-run casinos were established as forms of indirect taxation that,

²¹⁵ On the Cultural Mandates or State Conventions as they are sometimes called, see Barmé, *Luang Wichit Wathakan*, pp. 144-60; and Baker and Pasuk, *Thailand*, pp. 132-5.

²¹⁶ *BTWM*, 20 Nov. 1939.

²¹⁷ Lisut, [Gambling Handbook], p. 6.

supposedly, targeted the well-off and enabled the government to reduce and abolish direct forms of taxation, such as the land and capitation taxes, which fell heaviest upon the Siamese farmer, the backbone of the economy. These enterprises also provided income for developmental and administrative schemes, such as the creation of municipal governments. The promotion of certain forms of gambling and the prohibition of others was also geared towards transforming the kingdom of Siam into the nation-state of Thailand. On the one hand, casinos were opened to attract foreign visitors and to highlight the civilised, developed state of the reborn Thai nation. Gambling within such an establishment was acceptable because it was sophisticated, modern and *siwilai*. Cockfighting, on the other hand, was prohibited because it was a traditional rural pursuit, a throwback to the old Siam. The contradictory and hypocritical nature of this policy was obvious.²¹⁸ Perhaps it is these contradictions, more than any other factor, that made government attempts to restrict gambling ultimately futile.

By 1945, the Thai government had effectively criminalised all forms of gambling except for those conducted within tightly regulated parameters or those operated by the state itself. Moreover, the provision and management of gambling ventures, even the production of playing cards, had passed from the hands of private individuals and organisations – tax farmers, charities and businesses – into the almost exclusive possession of the state. In other words, the state had established a virtual monopoly on the ability to exploit gambling as a revenue provider; a right it guarded jealously through increasingly strict laws and complex licensing regulations. The end

²¹⁸ One MP, for instance, queried the government's initial lack of action against street gambling and questioned how it could be truly committed to restricting gambling when it was opening casinos. *Rai-ngan kanprachum sapha phutaeenratsadon samai ti 2 saman p. s. 2482*, vol. 2 [Assembly Records, 1939/40], Bangkok: Office of the Parliamentary Secretary, pp. 685-8.

result was a narrowing of the legal and social space in which people could gamble, in effect, the criminalisation of gambling.

Enforcement and Punishment

Laws are meaningless if not enforced. This chapter will examine how the Siamese government's gambling policy was implemented on the ground. It seeks to demonstrate the influence of those state institutions responsible for administering and enforcing the law – the police, the judiciary, and the penal administration – in determining government policy. These institutions tested the viability of the restrictions on gambling outlined in the preceding two chapters; it was they that ultimately determined the success or failure of particular policies. In this sense, they acted as a feedback loop that shaped future initiatives. Attention will also be paid to the influence of Buddhist teachings and the role of the Buddhist monkhood (the *Sangha*) on gambling policy.

Agents of Enforcement

Before exploring how gambling legislation was enforced it is necessary to establish who was responsible for its enforcement. Until the 1890s, the suppression of illegal gambling was primarily the responsibility of the gambling tax farmers.¹ As noted in Chapter 1, they had the power to investigate any cases of unsanctioned gambling within their district, arrest those involved, prosecute them, and then receive any fines imposed by the courts. Following the first closures of the Bangkok gambling houses in the late 1880s and early 1890s, these powers were gradually qualified and limited. For instance, the regulations for the gambling houses and *huai* lottery farm issued during this period required the tax farmers to be accompanied by either the district

¹ Before the 1890s, it seems that state officials were expressly charged only with enforcing the laws preventing children from gambling. See *PKPS*, 9, pp. 105-6.

chief or the police when making arrests.² Moreover, the lottery farmer was later stripped of the power to arrest fraudulent employees and punish them.³ Over the same period, state officials were given greater responsibility for suppressing illicit gambling. The 1893 gambling law, for example, charged the Ministry of the Interior and inspectors within the Revenue Department, in addition to the tax farmer, with enforcing the act.⁴ Nevertheless, Jardine, the first Inspector General of Police for Bangkok, indicates that the gambling tax farmers detected and prosecuted the majority of gambling offences until the end of the nineteenth century and perhaps later.⁵ The 1902 gambling law saw a further broadening of responsibility: all government officials down to the level of *kamnan* (sub-district chief) and village headman were charged with investigating and arresting cases of illegal gambling.⁶ Thus, while the gambling and lottery farms remained in existence, enforcement duties were shared between the tax farmer and state officials. However, the limitations on the tax farmer's authority made them unduly dependent upon the state for the protection of their monopolies, an interest that was not always shared by officials. In July 1899, for instance, a gambling house farmer in Nonthaburi complained to the Ministry of Finance that people were playing *thua po* and cards without his permission and the local authorities were doing nothing about it.⁷ Greater state involvement in the suppression of illegal gambling did not, therefore, necessarily mean improvements in the level of law enforcement; indeed, the example above suggests there may have been a decline.

² PKPS, 13, pp. 57, 277, 282.

³ NA R.5 Kh.14.1.Kh/4, 'Mahit to Chulalongkorn, 11 Jan. 1901'.

⁴ PKPS, 13, p. 256.

⁵ RPAB 1899-1900, p. 52.

⁶ PKPS, 18, pp. 268, 273, 551.

⁷ NA R.5 N.42.11/22, 'Chin Sieo Chu to Mahit, 13 July 1899'.

Perhaps the principal problem in enforcing Siam's gambling laws from the 1890s onwards was a lack of incentive: the gambling tax farmers had much more to lose from illegal gambling than the low-level state officials also charged with its suppression. Illicit gaming operations posed a serious threat to the gambling farmers' profits: underground *thua po* dens drew potential customers away from the gambling houses, while unauthorised individuals receiving stakes on the *huai* were essentially stealing directly from the lottery farmer. A further incentive for the tax farmers were the fines they stood to collect from those found guilty of gambling offences. In contrast, government officials had no such reason to pursue cases of illegal gambling. Given the inherent difficulties and dangers in detecting and busting illegal gaming rings, their negligence is understandable. Bandit gangs and Chinese secret societies were often involved in running underground dens; just infiltrating these groups in order to gain information was highly risky.⁸ Carrying out raids on illicit gaming operations could be even more so. In January 1919, for instance, four policemen were attacked when carrying out a bust. One was knocked unconscious and another pushed down a well; the situation was brought under control only after the police shot dead one of their assailants.⁹

A lack of motivation was compounded by an array of institutional problems within the police force, not least of which was the poor salaries policemen received. In his first annual report, that for 1898/9, insufficient pay topped the list of factors that Jardine believed were retarding the Bangkok force's efficiency.¹⁰ The low rate of

⁸ See, for instance, the 1924 report on the operations and hangouts of three criminal gangs in monthon Prachinburi. NA R.6 N.4.1/234, 'Yomarat to Phetchapani, 21 Jan. 1924'.

⁹ NA R.6 N.4.1/9, 'Phraya Si Woraphotthirat to Prince Prachin, 22 Jan. 1919 & 8 March 1919'. In December 1916, an official was shot dead by a group of illegal gamblers. *NSPT*, 6 Dec. 1916.

¹⁰ *RPAB 1898-99*, p. 2. Originally, a constable's rate of pay had been determined by the length of time they agreed to serve. Under Jardine, all salaries were revised: Siamese Chief Inspectors received 150 baht per month; Inspectors, 100; Head Constables, 60; Sergeants, 20, 30 or 40; and Constables 12, 15 or 18. *Ibid.*, p. 3.

remuneration remained an issue throughout the period in question: it not only meant police constables had little incentive to carry out their duties fully and encouraged corruption but, initially, it also made recruitment difficult. Consequently, around the turn of the twentieth century, the Bangkok force did not reach its sanctioned strength.¹¹ Moreover, those who did sign up were apparently of a low calibre: slaves, ex-convicts, the old, and the infirm.¹² Some improvements were made to the conditions of service during the 1900s and the manpower shortage was partially ameliorated by the introduction of conscription. But while this latter measure ensured there were more young recruits, conscription had, according to Lawson, a malign effect on discipline and morale.¹³ In 1920, conscripts were required to serve two years on a salary of just four baht a month and, understandably, their one concern was serving out their term. Within the force as a whole, salaries did not keep pace with inflation, leading Lawson to observe that while 20 baht a month for a first-grade (non-conscripted) gendarme had been adequate in the 1890s, 'It is not a living wage now and it is not possible to obtain good men for such remuneration.'¹⁴ Moreover, the force remained undermanned in spite of conscription. In 1915, E. W. Trotter, another British subject appointed to the Bangkok police, estimated there were 12,000 policemen – of whom only 7,000 were on active duty – in total in Siam, policing a population of about nine million. He recommended the force be increased by at least 6,000 in order to deal with crime adequately.¹⁵ Manpower was still an issue in the mid-1930s; each district had only eight policemen and as one MP in the Assembly put it: 'how could they [the Assembly members] expect such a small force to

¹¹ *RPAB 1898-99*, pp. 3-4; *RPAB 1899-1900*, pp. 4-6; *RPAB Year 120* [1901/2], pp. 6-7; *RPAB Year 122* [1903/4], pp. 5-7.

¹² *RPAB 1898-99*, p. 2; *RPAB 1899-1900*, p. 6.

¹³ NA R.6 N.4.1/165, 'A Report on work of Police and Gendarmerie and on the Criminal Statistics of Siam for the year B. E. 2462', pp. 62-4.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 3.

¹⁵ NA R.6 N.4.1/73, 'Trotter to Yomarat, 23 Dec. 1915'.

successfully tackle gambling suppression work?'¹⁶ In short, the police force remained underpaid and undermanned throughout the period covered by this study. When these factors are combined with the large number of more serious offences that demanded police attention, it can be seen how suppressing illegal gambling was afforded a relatively low priority. Much the same considerations applied to other state officials. Outside of Bangkok and until 1920 at the earliest, investigating crime was the responsibility of the district chief rather than the provincial gendarmerie, whose role was confined to keeping the peace and capturing bandits. As Lawson noted in his 1920 report, 'The investigation of crime by Amphurs is a failure. Amphurs have neither the time, the knowledge, nor the necessary subordinates to do the work.... For the last ten years both prevention and detection have been growing worse and worse. The amphurs themselves are not more incompetent than they were but their other work has increased enormously.'¹⁷ Similarly, a newspaper article in 1928 asserted that if the government wanted to improve suppression efforts, it should increase the salaries of *kamnans* and village headmen so that they might take more pride in their work.¹⁸

When all these factors are taken into consideration it is not surprising that state officials might chose to turn a blind eye to illegal gambling in return for bribes, or even conspire with illicit gaming rings in return for a cut of the profits. Corruption seems to have become especially acute in the post-1917 period. In his 1920 report, Lawson observed that: 'The abolition of gambling houses has not reduced gambling and has greatly increased bribery and corruption amongst the lower ranks of the

¹⁶ *BTWM*, 6 Nov. 1935.

¹⁷ NA R.6 N.4.1/165, 'A Report on work of Police and Gendarmerie and on the Criminal Statistics of Siam for the year B. E. 2462', p. 64.

¹⁸ *Si krung*, 12 May 1928.

Government services, not only in the Gendarmerie.'¹⁹ If anything, the police became even more complicit in illegal gambling operations. By the mid-1920s, for instance, it was rumoured that police in monthon Ratchaburi were receiving 300 baht a month from each underground den in the area.²⁰ Police Commissioner Phraya Athikon Prakat's Special Force was deeply implicated in such activities. After the 1932 coup, a former police officer stated that:

high-ranking police officers of the Special Force are receiving monthly payments from Chinese casino operators; a given establishment is required to pay each officer 150 baht per month. If the money isn't paid by the first of the month, the casino owner is arrested the following day and required to double the payment in order to escape prosecution. Moreover, at Chinese New year, the officers' men expect presents of gold and other things of value. Many casinos are operating by these arrangements, which I can personally attest have been in effect since at least 1923.²¹

So for every underground den busted by the police, there was another that enjoyed their protection. It is in this light that newspaper reports congratulating Phraya Athikon on the latest successful raid must be read; some papers were so effusive in their praise that it bordered on the ridiculous. The *Yamato*, for instance, was sure that gambling would disappear due to the Police Commissioner's 'supernatural powers' (*amnat khwamsaksit*).²²

Under such circumstances it was vital that the state offer some incentive for officials to suppress illegal gambling. Cash rewards for informing were offered from the late 1880s but it was not until June 1903 that they were given to police officers for making arrests.²³ Even then, though, the police received rewards only for pursuing

¹⁹ NA R.6 N.4.1/165, 'A Report on work of Police and Gendarmerie and on the Criminal Statistics of Siam for the year B. E. 2462', p. 66. For an example of a sub-district chief (*kamnan*) who was asked to resign because of allegations that he was receiving a share of the profits from an illegal den, see NA R.6/1 N.42/103, 'Governor of Minburi province to Chao Phraya Surabodi, 10 May 1926'.

²⁰ NA R.7 Kh.2/2, 'Ideas about suppressing gambling'.

²¹ Quoted in Copeland, 'Contested Nationalism', pp. 86-7.

²² *Yamato*, 5 May 1923. See also *CSW*, 9 May 1923; *Awanti*, 11 May 1923.

²³ *PKPS*, 19, pp. 126-7.

offences against the 1902 law. This led Lawson to reiterate the importance of such bonuses:

Now it may not be a very high moral standpoint but as a matter of fact Constables will take far more interest in arresting cases of gambling if they receive rewards than they will if they do not. Also I would point out it is quite impossible to have illicit gambling on any scale without the fact being known to the Police. The gamblers will naturally try and bribe the Police but it is not possible to bribe them all. If therefore the fines or a considerable proportion of them were paid to the arresting Police it is certain that illicit gambling will be very hard indeed.²⁴

In spite of these suggestions, little seems to have changed over a decade later. As Lawson noted in 1920:

The law is not enforced because either rewards are paid not at all, or else after such a long delay that they might as well not be paid. But though Government will neither pay the Gendarmerie a living wage, nor give rewards the proprietors of the illicit gambling houses will and do.²⁵

In short, the Siamese case provides a good example of the futility of trying to suppress gambling with an undermanned, underpaid and overburdened police force. Indeed, it was the government's restrictionist policy that gave state officials the opportunity to profit from gambling's illegality by entering into alliance with criminal gaming rings. While the police may have been successful in busting some underground operations, the protection certain elements of the force afforded to other illicit enterprises ultimately rendered the law largely irrelevant. Since it was impossible to eliminate illegal gambling, the police had little option but to regulate it informally, and, in the process, they acquired a vested interest in the continued illegality of gambling. This then became not only an impediment to the enforcement of Siam's gambling laws but also a barrier to the liberalisation of those laws.

²⁴ NA R.5 N.8.1/306, 'Lawson to Nares [Naret], 17 Jan. 1904 [1905]'.

²⁵ NA R.6 N.4.1/165, 'A Report on work of Police and Gendarmerie and on the Criminal Statistics of Siam for the year B. E. 2462', p. 66.

Obstacles to Enforcement

Having detailed some of the internal, institutional problems that hampered the enforcement of the gambling laws, it is time to consider external factors. By its very nature, illegal gambling is difficult to detect. It is often described as a 'victimless' crime, an epithet that, whilst crude, does emphasise the fact that when illegal gambling does take place there are no direct victims that might report the crime (there are, of course, many indirect victims). Moreover, due to its illegality, illicit gambling is usually conducted behind closed doors or in secretive, out-of-the-way places. Detecting gambling within private homes was complicated by police procedure. When the police wished to search a residence, they were required to produce a search warrant and to knock on the door. This gave those inside time to hide any evidence of wrongdoing or to flee the premises.²⁶ In the countryside, Siam's topography and sparse population made it ideal for conducting illegal activities. Dense jungle provided protection from prying eyes and rural people commonly gambled within its shadowy depths.²⁷ Farmer's shelters or isolated groves in the middle of paddy fields also made makeshift dens; players could see any officials approaching from afar and dispose of the evidence, throwing it in the flooded paddies or – in the case of games such as *bia bok* that were played with only a small number of cowries – swallowing it.²⁸ If gambling was being conducted within a village, scouts were posted to warn of police raids.²⁹ Under these circumstances, the detection of gambling offences was heavily dependent on surveillance operations by undercover police or spies, and tip-offs from informers.

²⁶ The *Nangsuphim thai* newspaper identified this as one of the main difficulties for the police in suppressing illegal gambling. *NT*, 12 Dec. 1916.

²⁷ Following the closure of dens in the south, for instance, many people were caught gambling in the jungle around the town of Songkhla. NA R.5 Kh.14.1.Kh/18, 'Damrong to Sommot, 13 Feb. 1904'.

²⁸ NA MT.4/153, 'Discussion on the suppression of illegal gambling – Meeting of Provincial Governors B. E. 2478'.

²⁹ *BTWM*, 20 March 1908.

Underground gambling rings naturally took precautions to protect their livelihoods, employing a wide range of security measures and stratagems to avoid detection and arrest. The *Nangsuphim thai* likened the underground gambling dens in the Sampheng district of Bangkok, which was a hotbed of illicit goings-on, to the hideouts of criminals in the movies, with their secret passages and elaborate escape routes.³⁰ The main entrances were usually stout wooden or metal doors; sometimes there was a series of them. Passwords were required to gain entry. Breaking these doors down took a long time, allowing the illegal gamblers to escape.³¹ Watchmen, usually protégés of the treaty powers and thus protected by extraterritorial rights, were employed to give warning of a raid and obstruct the police.³² One infamous den in the residence of a high-ranking official had a sophisticated electric lighting warning system: when the white bulb was on, it was safe to play; the red one came on when there was a raid.³³ Organisers of banned games such as *po pan* might also take the precaution of having a card license for their den, using it to delay officials and so gain time to hide any prohibited equipment.³⁴ In 1923, the *Bangkok Times* reported on the emergence of 'a new kind of gambling resort', which 'is not run in any one place for more than a couple of days and nights. Then it moves on to some other places known to followers of the game'.³⁵

The underground *huai* lottery, which was based on the results of the official *huai* and was run in those provinces with rail links to Bangkok, was particularly difficult to suppress due to strong organisational backing. Most of the unauthorised

³⁰ *NT*, 12 Dec. 1916.

³¹ This was the case when the provincial gendarmerie busted a large den, where up to 200 people usually gathered, in Takuapha province and managed to arrest just four. *KDM*, 14 Feb. 1930.

³² NA R.6. N.4.1/51, 'Phirentharathibodi to Director-General of the Police Department, 29 June 1915'; NA R.6 N.4.1/9, 'Si Woraphoththirat to Prachin, 11 Sept. 1917'.

³³ *Yamato*, 25 May 1923.

³⁴ *KDM*, 12 Jan. 1917.

³⁵ *BTWM*, 2 Oct. 1923.

clerks were Chinese and, given the large amounts of cash involved, it can be surmised that these operations had the backing of Chinese secret societies. A conspiracy of silence seems to have existed between the organisers and the players, and everything was done to ensure there was no evidence of wrongdoing whatsoever.³⁶ If arrests were made, they were only of low-level employees who would be supported financially while serving out any prison sentence.³⁷ Elaborate codes were used to disguise transactions and communications between the various parts of the operation. Illegal lottery clerks in Nakhon Pathom, for instance, would send the daily register of stakes received in the form of a shopping list to their agents in Bangkok: an order for five bahts-worth of cardamom and ten of cloves meant five and ten baht had been placed on the letters *ko kai* and *kho khai* respectively. Even if the authorities should manage to seize this register, it would never stand up as evidence in court. The governor of monthon Nakhon Chaisi managed to break this particular ring by using three women to place stakes on all 34 letters of the lottery – 12 letters for two of them and ten for the other – with four illegal clerks. By doing this, one of the girls was guaranteed to win with each of the clerks. When they went to collect their winnings, the local police were able to arrest the clerks, though one escaped. Effective as this ploy was, though, Damrong thought it could not be used again because everyone now knew of it.³⁸

Given all the inherent difficulties in detecting illegal gambling, cash rewards were vital for not only ensuring the commitment of the police but also for securing the services of spies and informants. Rewards of one chang (80 baht) were first offered in the late 1880s for information that led to the successful conviction of *huai*

³⁶ *KDM*, 19 Sept. 1913.

³⁷ NA R.6 N.4.1/9, 'Phraya Maha Ammat to Vajiravudh, 19 March 1915'.

³⁸ NA R.5 N.6.2/982, 'Damrong to Sommot, 13 Aug. 1910'.

chap yiki organisers.³⁹ Following the initial closures of the Bangkok gambling houses and the consequent increase in illegal gambling, the range of offences on which rewards were offered was broadened and the sums increased so as to encourage people to come forward. Informants now stood to receive half of the fine levied on the guilty party; if the latter could not pay, the state would offer one *chang*.⁴⁰ The payment of rewards for convictions under the 1902 gambling law was on a different principle, however. The convicted party was expected to pay a reward in addition to any fine imposed; if unable to pay, they were liable to imprisonment. Crucially, this law did not commit the state to cover the reward if the guilty party defaulted.⁴¹ This raised the problem of how rewards were to be paid, if at all, in such circumstances. The 1930 law, meanwhile, made no provision for their payment. Phraya Chinda Phirom (Chit na Songkhla), then Minister of Justice, objected to the convicted party paying rewards in addition to a fine because it amounted to them paying for their own arrest. The government thus reverted to the original system whereby rewards were deducted from any fine imposed on the offender. The state would pay if the offender could not and a sum of money was budgeted for this purpose.⁴² Finally, the 1936 law once more made the convicted party responsible for paying a reward – one quarter of the amount they were fined – in addition to the fine.⁴³ Nevertheless, the Ministry of the Interior still applied for an annual budget for the payment of rewards in those cases where the defendants could not pay but this was quashed by the Ministry of

³⁹ *PKPS*, 11, pp. 180-1.

⁴⁰ *PKPS*, 12, pp. 113-15.

⁴¹ *PKPS*, 18, p. 278. The tariff for rewards was later set at no more than two-thirds of the fine. *PKPS*, 19, pp. 126-7.

⁴² NA R.7 Kh.2/2, 'Report of the Council of Ministers, 23 June 1930'; NA MT.4/153, 'Discussion on gambling rewards – Meeting of provincial governors, B. E. 2478'.

⁴³ *PKPS*, 48, p. 1777.

Finance.⁴⁴ These constant changes to the payment system indicate that the government clearly recognised the necessity of offering rewards but was highly reluctant to cover the costs itself.

This thriftiness on the part of the state severely handicapped efforts at suppressing gambling. During the first half of the 1930s, there was a clear difference in the number of arrests made for gambling offences when rewards were paid and when the budget for them ran out.⁴⁵ Similarly, when the courts stopped ordering the payment of rewards in the mid-1910s, arrest rates fell.⁴⁶ Moreover, the complicated regulations and payment procedure led to frequent delays.⁴⁷ There were often cases where an informant thought they were entitled to a reward but did not receive one due to a technicality.⁴⁸ Such problems clearly had a demoralising effect upon these spies and informers, and were hardly going to encourage others to offer their assistance. In 1936 one Nai Phrom summed up this situation in a petition to the Ministry of the Interior. Despite his frequent requests, he had yet to receive a reward for his part in helping bust a large, long-established den. He had taken a great risk in infiltrating the operation in order to gain the necessary information for a successful raid and he fully expected the defendants would seek their revenge. If the reward was not forthcoming, he, and others like him, would not be so willing to help the government in the future.⁴⁹

⁴⁴ NA (2) SR.0201.31/7, 'Minister of the Interior to PM, 22 March 1937'. In late 1935, a request for a similar budget provoked heated debate in the National Assembly but was eventually granted. *BTWM*, 6 Nov. 1935.

⁴⁵ NA MT.4/153, 'Discussion on gambling rewards – Meeting of provincial governors, B. E. 2478'.

⁴⁶ NA R.6 N.11.5.Ch/4, 'Yomarat to Phetchapani, 5 June 1915'.

⁴⁷ Delays in the payment of rewards were a problem right from when rewards were introduced in the late 1880s. See for instance NA R.5 N.42.11/2, 'Phra Siriaisawan to Phra Antinarakon, 27 May 1892'.

⁴⁸ In 1937, for instance, one informer did not receive anything because the court had decided only to imprison the defendants and there was thus no fine on which to calculate the reward. NA MT.0201.1.1/690, 'Nakhon Si Thammarat Provincial Committee to Undersecretary of the Interior, Nov. 1937'.

⁴⁹ NA MT.0201.1.1/19, 'Nai Phrom to Minister of the Interior, 21 March 1936'. The reason for the delay was that the budget for rewards had run out in the middle of the year 1935/6 and the Ministry of

Enforcement of the gambling laws suffered from a range of other problems. When the government first began to implement its restrictionist policy in the late 1880s and early 1890s, it laboured under two major constraints. Firstly, some aspects of the new legislation conflicted with established custom. As mentioned earlier, the Siamese and Chinese New Years and the Songkran festival were traditionally times when there was a free license to gamble, on whatever and wherever one chose. However, the 1891 gambling house regulations and the 1893 law made it illegal to play *thua po* outside the gambling houses.⁵⁰ Nevertheless, the government realised that clamping down too heavily and too hastily on such gambling might antagonise segments of the population, especially the Chinese. It was thus initially willing to turn a blind eye to infringements during these festivities.⁵¹ Secondly, the state lacked the administrative capabilities to fully enforce its will; the criminal justice system had neither the manpower nor the infrastructure to cope with an influx of illegal gambling cases. Events surrounding the Siamese and Chinese New Years in 1896 provide a good illustration of these points. They also mark the start of a more hard-line policy. Since the law had not previously been strictly enforced, it had given rise to the mistaken belief that these festivities were exempt from the law.⁵² It had also encouraged royalty and government officials to indulge in gambling, behaviour that was considered inappropriate for their status and rank.⁵³ Convinced by Prince

the Interior had refused to sanction more. The reward thus had to wait until the next annual budget had been authorised, though it is not recorded whether Nai Phrom did eventually receive it. NA MT.0201.1.1/19, 'Nakhon Naiyok Provincial Committee to Undersecretary of the Interior, 20 May 1936'.

⁵⁰ *PKPS*, 13, pp. 53, 252-3.

⁵¹ NA R.5 N.11.3.K/3, 'Devawongse to Sommot, 1 Feb. 1896'; NA R.5 N.11.3.K/4, 'Prince Phichit to Chulalongkorn, 29 April 1896'.

⁵² NA R.5 N.11.3.K/4, 'Phichit to Chulalongkorn, 29 April 1896'.

⁵³ NA R.5 N.11.3.K/3, 'Naret to Sommot, 24 Jan. 1896'.

Devawongse that the Chinese would not cause trouble, Chulalongkorn ordered that the law was now to be upheld and playing *thua po* outside the dens forbidden.⁵⁴

Once both sets of festivities were over, Prince Phichit Prichakon, the Minister of Justice from October 1894 to March 1897, wrote to the king concerning a report from the Criminal Court. One Nai Am had brought charges of illegal gambling, specifically playing *thua po* outside the gambling houses, against 49 Siamese and Chinese, men and women. Since he suggested that the defendants be fined 500 baht each and that he, as plaintiff, should receive no less than half the total fines, it can be concluded that Nai Am was motivated by greed.⁵⁵ On the argument that the accused were gambling during a time when it was traditionally allowed, the court sought advice on whether to try the case or not.⁵⁶ In Phichit's opinion it was unwise. If the court were to fine the defendants, he reasoned, it would set a precedent and lead to a flood of similar accusations because those who successfully prosecuted a case stood to make large sums of money. He feared troublemakers would be quick to take advantage at the expense of the general population. Moreover, the courts and judiciary would be overwhelmed with such cases. The poor, meanwhile, would be unable to pay their fines and would thus end up in prison, leading to overcrowding.⁵⁷ Despite these objections, Chulalongkorn insisted no exceptions could be made: the gambling act had been issued long ago and advance warning of a clampdown had also been given. If exceptions to the law were made on the basis of tradition, the people would not heed future legislation.⁵⁸ In other words, Chulalongkorn considered enforcing the gambling laws to be essential for maintaining state authority.

⁵⁴ NA R.5 N.11.3.K/3, 'Devawongse to Sommot, 1 Feb. 1896'; 'Chulalongkorn to Naret, 4 Feb. 1896'.

⁵⁵ NA R.5 N.11.3.K/4, 'Report of Criminal Court, 7 April 1896'.

⁵⁶ NA R.5 N.11.3.K/4, 'Phraya Thammasan to Phra Si Thammasan, 7 April 1896'.

⁵⁷ NA R.5 N.11.3.K/4, 'Phichit to Chulalongkorn, 29 April 1896'.

⁵⁸ NA R.5 N.11.3.K/4, 'Chulalongkorn to Phichit, 9 May 1896'.

One persistent obstacle to the enforcement of the gambling laws throughout the entire period covered by this study was the involvement of royals, nobles and government officials in illegal gambling. From the late 1910s, this became particularly acute and, as Chapter 5 will detail, it was a major issue for the kingdom's nascent popular press and some sections of the public. Due to their status and privileges, high-ranking members of society and those close to them seemed to enjoy near immunity from arrest and prosecution. Although the police may have known full well that illegal gambling was going on in the residence of some prince or senior official, carrying out a raid on such a place was risky. As the *Bangkok Post* explained: 'it is essential that the raid should yield evidence that would prove the case to the hilt in Court',⁵⁹ the implication being that otherwise those hapless police officers involved in the arrests would face the wrath of the house owner. Similarly, the *Sara rat* noted that it was this fear of status and privilege that ensured only commoners were arrested for gambling offences.⁶⁰ It is revealing that when the long-running gambling den on the estate of Phraya Phuban Banthoeng – an important official within the Ministry of the Palace – was busted in May 1923, a number of senior police officers were in attendance as a mark of respect.⁶¹ Moreover, the official apparently boasted that the police would be unable to touch him.⁶² Similarly, one Phraya Mahathep, a senior officer in the Royal Bodyguard who was with Phraya Phuban Banthoeng at the time of the raid, dared one of the policemen to arrest him.⁶³ Clearly, both officials believed their rank guaranteed them protection from the law. However, although neither were at the actual scene of the crime, the fact that illegal gambling had been going on right under their noses was sufficient for charges to be

⁵⁹ *BTWM*, 19 July 1924.

⁶⁰ *Sara rat*, 8 May 1923. See also Kanchana, [Government Policy], p. 202.

⁶¹ *Yamato*, 5 May 1923.

⁶² *Awanti*, 11 May 1923.

⁶³ *Yamato*, 25 May 1923.

brought against them. Significantly, this seems to have been the first time the police had successfully busted an illicit den in the home of such high-ranking officials.⁶⁴ The way in which Vajiravudh's government dealt with this case will be examined later.

A further obstacle was that the police had to obtain the king's permission to arrest and prosecute any member of the royal family, as well as to search any royal residences.⁶⁵ This latter process was time-consuming and meant these places were effectively off-limits to the police. Unsurprisingly, some royals and those close to them – relatives, servants, friends – took advantage of this protection. During January 1909, investigations into illegal gambling in Thanyaburi, a farming district on the outskirts of Bangkok, revealed that an illicit gambling ring was operating in the residence of a prince's wife (*Mom*). This was a major operation: the residence was guarded by Sikhs and every evening towards the end of the harvest season (December-January) around one hundred people, mostly ethnic Lao migrant farmhands, would go there to gamble away their wages. The organisers included a government official, the younger brother of the prince's wife – Nai Chi – and one of her servants; each night it was estimated they were making between 600 and 1,200 baht in commission (*kha tong*). For the local authorities, it was imperative something be done to stop this: they had had considerable success in arresting and prosecuting minor cases of illegal gambling but their failure to do anything about large-scale cases had led people to criticise them for being unjust (*pen a-yuttitham*).⁶⁶ Chao Phraya Yomarat urged the governor of Thanyaburi to bring charges against those

⁶⁴ *Yamato*, 5 May 1923.

⁶⁵ See, for instance, NA R.7 M.99/3, 'Prince Lopburi to Mahithon, 12 June 1926', in which the king's permission is asked for a raid on a prince's palace and NA R.7 Y.4/8, 'Chinda to Mahithon, 15 March 1930 & 7 June 1930', in which permission is requested to prosecute another prince. Following the latter's conviction for illegal gambling, he absconded. The police were thus obliged to obtain permission to arrest and imprison him once more.

⁶⁶ NA R.5 N.3.2.K/111, 'Khun Naranukunkit to Phraya Nonthaburi, 28 Jan. 1909'.

involved if he believed there was enough evidence but warned him to be careful not to fail.⁶⁷ Summons were issued for Nai Chi, identified as head of the ring, and his cohorts but they went into hiding in the residence, meaning royal permission was required before a raid could be conducted. A year later the gambling was still going on. Indeed, during Chinese New Year, the residence was apparently as crowded as one of the capital's gambling houses. As the governor observed, even if Nai Chi and his followers were successfully prosecuted, the gambling would continue because the proceeds would be more than enough to cover any fine. Furthermore, since the residence was protected, the police would have to receive further permission before entering again, blocking the opportunity for a lightning raid to disrupt the operation.⁶⁸

Even when it was more a case of bending the law rather than breaking it, such activities served as a vivid illustration of the uneven application of the law. Lawson summed up this state of affairs when he drew attention to how a prince had exceeded the time limit for licensed gambling to be conducted in his palace: 'It does not seem right to me that it should go on in this way, the festivities being over. More-over [sic] I hear that he proposes to have gambling every month and if the Police are to allow his Royal Highness to do it I really do not see how they can prevent any one else doing the same.'⁶⁹ Perhaps this was considered an abuse of privilege only in Western eyes but, as Chapter 5 will illustrate, Lawson's concern that such behaviour by members of the Siamese elite was undermining efforts to reduce gambling was echoed by the emergent popular Thai-language press of the 1910s. Indeed, the injustices resulting from the special status of the princes was one of the reasons cited

⁶⁷ NA R.5 N.3.2.K/111, 'Yomarat to Nonthaburi, 31 Jan. 1909'.

⁶⁸ NA R.5 N.3.2.K/111, 'Nonthaburi to Yomarat, 15 Feb. 1910'.

⁶⁹ NA R.5 N.8.1/236, 'Lawson to Nares [Naret], 19 Dec. 1902'.

by Luang Wichit Wathakan, chief ideologue of the Phibun regime, for the 1932 coup.⁷⁰

Extraterritoriality and the participation of foreigners in illegal gambling presented a similar problem.⁷¹ Under the provisions of the numerous 'unequal' treaties Siam signed with the various Western powers in the mid-nineteenth century and with Japan in 1898, both indigenous and colonial subjects of these countries enjoyed the right to be tried by their own consul rather than the Siamese courts. The decision as to whether or not Siamese law might be applied to foreigners and, by extension, whether they should be punished for any violations of it, was thus down to the consuls.⁷² Following the decision to clamp down on the playing of *thua po* outside the gambling houses in 1896, for instance, the Bangkok police had to ask the British, French and Portuguese consuls to prohibit their subjects from breaking this law.⁷³ Additionally, the Siamese police had to apply to the relevant consul for warrants to search the property of their protected subjects and to arrest them: the arrested person was then turned over to the consul. Rather than give general warrants allowing for the arrest of all subjects committing a particular offence, certain consuls would require the name of the suspect and sometimes even evidence of their wrongdoing before issuing a warrant.⁷⁴ All of this created a time-consuming process that prevented the police from taking immediate action against foreign lawbreakers. Extraterritoriality thus afforded subjects of the treaty powers a great deal of protection from the

⁷⁰ Kenneth P. Landon, *Siam in Transition: A Brief Survey of Cultural Trends in the Five Years since the Revolution of 1932*, London: Oxford University Press, 1939, pp. 18-19.

⁷¹ On the implications of extraterritoriality for the policing of Bangkok see Hong, 'Extraterritoriality in Bangkok', pp. 128-33.

⁷² For an overview of extraterritoriality in Siam and the provisions of the various treaties see Francis Bowes Sayre, 'The Passing of Extraterritoriality in Siam', *American Journal of International Law*, 22, 1 (Jan. 1928), pp. 70-88. Extraterritorial rights were gradually limited from the 1900s onwards but were not fully revoked until 1938.

⁷³ NA R.5 N.11.3.K/4, 'Naret to Chulalongkorn, 26 Feb. 1896'; 'Phra Anan Nararak to Naret, 13 Feb. 1896'. While the British and Portuguese consuls consented, the French consul was not present and the police were thus unable to secure his assistance.

⁷⁴ NA R.5 N.11.3.K/5, 'Chulalongkorn to Naret, 3 Feb. 1898'; CSW, 27 April 1917.

Siamese authorities. The potential for abuse was compounded by the fact that other Asians, primarily Chinese immigrants, could also gain this protection by applying to one of the treaty powers for protégé status; these protection papers were commonly bought and sold by consular officials.⁷⁵ Indeed, the ease with which French papers could be secured made it 'the nationality "of choice" for pawnshop operators, heads of secret societies, and others who were on the thin edge of the law.'⁷⁶

For the Siamese government, extraterritoriality meant it was dependent on the assistance and goodwill of the treaty powers for the successful suppression of illegal gambling. But this help was not always forthcoming. In 1917, for instance, the *Chino sayam warasap* newspaper criticised some unnamed consuls for protecting those of their subjects making a living through illegal gambling, instead of aiding Siamese officials in its suppression.⁷⁷ The French were especially uncooperative at times. Indeed, during Chulalongkorn's reign, both Siamese and British officials believed the French exploited extraterritoriality to stir up disorder within Bangkok and thereby further their imperial ambitions.⁷⁸ Moreover, following the Paknam crisis and the subsequent Franco-Siamese treaty in 1893, France was particularly aggressive in enrolling protégés amongst the kingdom's ethnic Khmer and Lao, as well as the Chinese, in an attempt to increase its influence.⁷⁹ Unsurprisingly, the French consul was disinclined to aid the Siamese authorities in suppressing illegal gambling. For instance, when the Bangkok police applied for warrants in January 1898 to search four properties in Sampheng where illegal gambling was suspected and which were owned by Chinese under French protection, the consul initially refused on the

⁷⁵ Sayre, 'Passing of Extraterritoriality', p. 73.

⁷⁶ Hong, 'Extraterritoriality in Bangkok', p. 134.

⁷⁷ *CSW*, 17 April 1917.

⁷⁸ Hong, 'Extraterritoriality in Bangkok', p. 129.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 134; David Streckfuss, 'The Mixed Colonial Legacy in Siam: Origins of Thai Racist Thought, 1890-1910' in Laurie Sears (ed.), *Autonomous Histories, Particular Truths: Essays in Honour of John Smail*, Madison: University of Wisconsin, 1993, pp. 132-7.

grounds that such gambling was traditionally permitted during Chinese New Year, which was fast approaching.⁸⁰ Warrants were eventually granted but only with the condition that the police be accompanied by a French official when searching these properties.⁸¹ More seriously, it was even suggested that the French consul had been warning those under his jurisdiction of impending raids.⁸²

Although France and Britain gave up extraterritorial rights for their Asian protégés in the border treaties concluded with Siam in 1907 and 1909 respectively, extraterritoriality remained an impediment to law enforcement. In the immediate aftermath of the abolition of the gambling houses, underground gambling rings commonly employed foreigners with extraterritorial rights, particularly Japanese citizens, to act as fronts for their illicit operations. These Japanese would become residents in houses doubling as gambling dens and thereby prevent the police from carrying out spontaneous raids. As with the French, the Japanese consul granted search and arrest warrants only on condition that a consular official was always in attendance.⁸³ The first raid on such a den was carried out on the night of 11 August 1917. Fifteen police officers, accompanied by the obligatory Japanese representative, raided a house in Bangkok's Hualamphong district, which, according to a sign in Thai, was the residence of a Japanese person called Ono. Despite Ono's attempts to delay the police while the gamblers disposed of the evidence and tried to escape, the raid was a success. Twenty-three people, mostly Chinese and Siamese including one government official, were arrested. Cash and equipment for playing *po kam* were seized. Ono, meanwhile, was instructed to report to the Japanese embassy the following day. However, he was arrested later that night for assaulting a rickshaw

⁸⁰ NA R.5 N.11.3.K/5, 'Naret to Chulalongkorn, 21 Jan. 1898'.

⁸¹ NA R.5 N.11.3.K/5, 'Devawongse to Chulalongkorn, 28 Jan. 1898'.

⁸² NA R.5 N.11.3.K/5, 'Chulalongkorn to Devawongse, 24 Jan. 1898'; 'Devawongse to Chulalongkorn, 28 Jan. 1898'.

⁸³ NA R.6 N.4.1/9, 'Yomarat to Prachin, 15 Aug. 1917'.

coolie and a policeman. The police had planned a number of similar raids for the same night but, once they had returned to the station with the suspects and evidence, they received news that various dens had already shut up shop. While the evidence at the first raid was being collected, two other Japanese had briefly turned up there and it was assumed they had tipped off the other dens. This suggests that Ono and other Japanese 'doormen' like him were part of a city-wide organisation offering protection for illegal gambling dens.⁸⁴ Recognising the seriousness of this situation, Chao Phraya Yomarat urged that all involved should be heavily punished so as to deter others from using foreigners to protect themselves from the authorities: the Chinese were to be deported and the official dismissed.⁸⁵ Furthermore, Vajiravudh felt it was imperative that they prosecute Ono in the Japanese consular court in order to set an example.⁸⁶ However, the Japanese consul gave him the choice of either being prosecuted in Siam or voluntarily leaving the country. Ono chose the latter.⁸⁷ To sum up, extraterritoriality not only provided protection for the subjects and protégés of the treaty powers but also, indirectly, for Siamese nationals.

Under certain circumstances the Siamese authorities were willing to turn a blind eye to illegal gambling. In 1921, for instance, an informer wrote to the king's secretary concerning the gambling taking place in a teacher's club. As he openly admitted, he was looking for a reward, and had already informed the local police and the Minister of Education but neither had taken any action.⁸⁸ This was his last resort but to no avail. Chao Phraya Yomarat merely wrote to the chairman of the club, Chao Phraya Thammasakmontri, urging him to be more careful in future. He justified this

⁸⁴ Following this raid, there were also rumours that these Japanese 'doormen' held a meeting with den owners in order to reassure them that they could still protect them against police action and that their activities should continue. NA R.6 N.4.1/9, 'Phirentharathibodi to Prince Khamrop, 13 Aug. 1917'.

⁸⁵ NA R.6 N.4.1/9, 'Yomarat to Prachin, 15 Aug. 1917'.

⁸⁶ NA R.6 N.4.1/9, 'Vajiravudh to Yomarat, 17 Aug. 1917'.

⁸⁷ NA R.6 N.4.1/9, 'Si Woraphotthirat to Prachin, 25 Sept. 1917'.

⁸⁸ NA R.6 N.26/6, 'Letter from B. Boon Long, 1 Feb. 1921'.

stance by arguing that, while gambling in members clubs was against the law, it was in reality quite normal and a custom all over the world. So long as it was for entertainment and relaxation, was conducted among members only, and the sums staked were not excessive, it was harmless. Additionally, since it was not possible to prohibit gambling in the clubs and hotels frequented by foreigners, it was inappropriate to take action against Siamese social clubs where gambling also went on.⁸⁹ While such a position was born out of common sense, the idea that gambling in certain locations and/or by certain persons was perfectly acceptable undermined the general thrust of the government's attempts to restrict gambling.

To conclude, there were too many institutional weaknesses, obstacles and inconsistencies in the way the gambling laws were enforced for gambling to ever be successfully tamed. The police may have had periodic success in curbing illegal gambling but it and its organisers always remained just out of reach, continuously evolving and finding new tricks for evading the law. Indeed, there was a limit to the extent illegal gambling could be restricted; a limit that was, in a sense, self-imposed by the police, who were happy to tolerate certain underground operations in return for bribes. This informal regulation of illegal gambling by the police merely reflected the inherent contradiction within the government's broader policy, specifically, that, despite efforts to reduce gambling, certain forms of gambling in certain conditions with certain players were acceptable. In practice, however, it was the police, rather than the government, that determined what was and what was not tolerable.

⁸⁹ NA R.6 N.26/6, 'Yomarat to Chakraphan, 26 Feb. 1921'.

In the Dock

Having examined the role of the police and the problems they faced in enforcing the gambling laws, it is now necessary to consider the role of the Siamese courts. Besides trying and sentencing offenders, the courts were also crucial in determining what exactly constituted gambling. This section will examine both these aspects. But first it is necessary to outline briefly the development and structure of the country's judicial system, and to comment on the limitations of the sources.

Prior to Chulalongkorn's state reforms in the 1890s, there were some thirty-odd courts under the jurisdiction of the various traditional ministries. The Ministry of Justice was established in 1892 in order to rationalise this chaotic and inefficient system along Western lines and to bring all the kingdom's courts under its centralised administration.⁹⁰ Three basic levels of court were established: courts of first instance, appellate courts, and the Supreme Court (*san dika*). Within Bangkok, the first tier included a civil court, a criminal court, and several misdemeanour or magistrate courts (*san porisapha*). Following the promulgation of the Law on the Provincial Courts in 1896, a three-tiered system of courts of first instance based on monthon, provinces (*muang*) and districts (*khwaeng*) was gradually implemented throughout Siam.⁹¹ According to Tamara Loos, this process coincided with a year-on-year increase in court cases due to 'better accounting systems; the penetration of the centralized state, its police force, and its laws into areas outside the capital; and the promulgation of standardized procedural law.'⁹² During the 1890s, the newly-

⁹⁰ For an in-depth examination of the transformation of the judicial system see David Engel, *Law and Kingship in Thailand during the Reign of King Chulalongkorn*, Michigan Papers on South and Southeast Asia No. 9, Ann Arbor, Michigan: Center for South and Southeast Asian Studies, 1975, pp. 59-93.

⁹¹ These provincial courts remained under the jurisdiction of the trail-blazing Ministry of the Interior until they were transferred to the Ministry of Justice in 1912.

⁹² Tamara Loos, 'Gender Adjudicated: Translating Modern Legal Subjects in Siam', PhD dissertation, Cornell University, 1999, p. 60.

reformed court system was faced with a backlog of cases, a situation exacerbated by a shortage of trained judges. Indeed, the courts remained overburdened and the judges overworked into the 1930s.

The following discussion of the judiciary's attitude towards illegal gambling is based largely on cases that were submitted to the Supreme Court. Although such cases came from all over the kingdom, usually passing through the appellate courts first, they are by no means representative of gambling cases dealt with by the lower courts. There were strict limits on the circumstances in which a case could be appealed, usually on the basis of misapplied law, as opposed to the prosecutor's or defendant's dissatisfaction with the outcome.⁹³ Thus, those cases dealt with by the Supreme Court tended to be unusual or unique. Nevertheless, this does have some advantages for the historian. When the Supreme Court resolved complicated legal issues, its decisions often became the standard (*banthatthan*) to be applied to similar cases in the future.⁹⁴ For instance, it played a critical role in determining whether a particular game that was not mentioned specifically in the gambling laws was sufficiently similar to games that were mentioned as to bring it within the scope of the law. Moreover, the Supreme Court also set precedents on the appropriate sentence for particular offences. In other words, an examination of Supreme Court cases indicates how the judiciary wished the law to be applied. These cases have been supplemented by records of lower court decisions drawn from a wider variety of sources, including newspapers, to build up a more detailed picture of how the law was actually applied.

The first aspect of the judiciary's work for consideration is how gambling offenders were punished, with particular attention to the circumstances under which

⁹³ Ibid., p. 63.

⁹⁴ As the compiler of a collection of Supreme Court rulings on gambling cases eloquently put it, these judgments were like a whetstone on which to sharpen a knife. See 'Foreword' in Phra Borirak Nitikaset (comp.), *Phraratchabanyat kanphanan kap khamphiphaksadika banthatthan* [The Gambling Act and Supreme Court Precedents], np, nd.

custodial sentences were imposed. Many of the pre-1890 gambling laws prescribed strokes of the rattan as a penalty, in addition to a fine, but this was rarely applied following the judicial reforms of the 1890s.⁹⁵ From then on, a fine was the usual penalty for the majority of gambling convictions. Indeed, as mentioned in Chapter 2, the 1893 law prescribed terms of imprisonment only in lieu of payment of a fine. Moreover, given Prince Phichit's concerns about the ability of the criminal justice system to handle an influx of gambling cases, it can be surmised that during the 1890s the courts kept the amount people were fined for minor gambling offences to a minimum so as to prevent the prisons from being flooded with convicted gamblers who were unable to pay. Indeed, this seems to have remained the standard for most minor cases throughout the period covered by this study, even though the 1902 law and its successors in the 1930s prescribed imprisonment as a penalty for playing both forbidden games and permitted ones without a license. Up until the late 1910s, fines in these minor cases tended to be around 60 to 100 baht, with about 20 baht being the lowest and rising to 200 baht at most.⁹⁶ Along with the organiser or banker, the owner of the property in which the gambling took place usually received a heavier fine. Guilty pleas entailed a reduction in the offender's penalty: under Section 59 of the 1908 Penal Code this was set at a maximum of half the original penalty.⁹⁷ Nevertheless, despite the apparent leniency of the courts, there were times when the

⁹⁵ During its work clearing the backlog of cases in Ayutthaya province in 1896 and 1897, for instance, the Special Commission converted a Chinese man's sentence for gambling with children from 30 strokes to 15 days' imprisonment, which the offender had already served while awaiting trial. Tips, *Crime and Punishment*, p. 165. Whipping was abandoned under the 1908 Penal Code. Tokichi Masao, 'The New Penal Code of Siam', *Journal of the Siam Society*, 5, 2 (1908), p. 4.

⁹⁶ *NT*, 12 May 1917. For examples of fines in this range see NA R.5 N.3.5.K/5, 'List of criminal cases, August 1903'; NA R.5 N.3.5.K/12, 'List of criminal cases, January 1905'; NA R.5 N.3.5.K/67, 'List of criminal cases, May 1905'; 'List of criminal cases, June 1905'; NA R.5 N.3.3.Ch/16, 'Phra Thepphlu to Minister of Local Government, 8 June 1907, 11 March & 5 April 1908'; *SO* [t], 2 Feb. 1916; *CSW*, 20 Dec. 1916; *NT*, 27 Jan. & 16 Feb. 1917; 'Ruling No. 594 & 595/2460', *Thammasan*, 1, pp. 303-7; 'Ruling No. 38/2461' & 'Ruling No. 87/2461', *Thammasan*, 2, pp. 31-4, 85-9; 'Ruling No. 888/2462', Borirak, [Gambling Act], pp. 31-32.

⁹⁷ *The Penal Code for the Kingdom of Siam R. S. 127 (1908)*, Bangkok: American Presbyterian Mission Press, 1908, pp. 17-18.

defendants were unable to pay these fines and thus found themselves imprisoned. In 1907, for instance, a Chinese man found guilty of being the banker (*chao mu*) for a forbidden game and two players were imprisoned for four months and two months respectively in lieu of paying their fines.⁹⁸ When it came to *huai* lottery offences, however, the courts did not hesitate to impose prison sentences. In 1915, for example, a Chinese man was sentenced to 6 months' imprisonment and fined 500 baht for illegally receiving stakes on the *huai*.⁹⁹ A year later the Bangkok Criminal Court gave two other Chinese terms of imprisonment for running underground lottery operations; both were sentenced to two years, with one receiving an additional eight months because he was a repeat offender.¹⁰⁰ These heavy sentences reflected the importance of the *huai* lottery farm for state finances.

From the 1910s onwards, the public prosecutors and the courts began to take an increasingly hard line towards repeat offenders and those playing particular banned games. Indeed, a Supreme Court judgment in 1912 seems to mark a watershed. That year the public prosecutor for Phetchaburi filed a petition against the light punishment of 11 Siamese, including two women, convicted of playing *thua* outside the gambling houses. The provincial court had passed sentence as follows: the banker, Nai Khian, had previously been convicted of playing a prohibited game; once this and his guilty plea had been taken into consideration he was fined 150 baht. The remaining defendants pleaded not guilty; the two women and one man were fined 80 baht each, while the rest were acquitted. All convicted managed to pay their fines. The prosecutor then appealed on the grounds that a mere fine was not going to deter

⁹⁸ NA R.5 N.3.3.K/87, 'Thepphlu to Naret, 10 July 1907'. See also NA R.5 N.3.3.Ch/7, 'Phraya Damrong to Naret, 29 April 1903'; NA R.5 N.3.3.Ch/15, 'Thepphlu to Naret, 18 May 1907'.

⁹⁹ KDM, 10 Nov. 1915.

¹⁰⁰ KDM, 12 Aug. 1916. Under Section 72 of the Penal Code, any found guilty of a further offence within five years of having been convicted for a previous one were to have their new sentence increased by one third. *The Penal Code*, p. 21.

them from offending again (*mai khet lap*). The appellate court duly amended Nai Khian's fine but it was not enough for the prosecutor, whose petition to the Supreme Court was approved by Prince Damrong. The Supreme Court took the view that:

The people of the outer and inner monthons are hopelessly addicted to gambling and repeatedly break the law. Nai Khian has already been fined once for illegal gambling but has not learned his lesson and persists in gambling. It is not fitting to show any mercy. He should be punished with imprisonment to set an example (*yang yang*) to the people.¹⁰¹

Nai Khian's fine was increased to 200 baht and he was sentenced to two months' imprisonment. The other three received one month. The importance of this ruling is underlined by the fact that it was published in *Thesaphiban*, the Ministry of the Interior periodical that contained guidelines for the kingdom's administrators.¹⁰²

The need for harsher penalties was echoed by some sections of the press. Commenting on the prevalence of illegal gambling in Sampheng, the *Nangsuphim thai* noted that fines were ineffective because they were insignificant when compared with the proceeds from running an underground den. Only prison was a sufficient deterrent.¹⁰³ During the 1920s, heavier fines began to be levied for playing banned games. In June 1924, for instance, the Criminal Court fined the female owner of a house in which *po kam* was being conducted 600 baht; others present were fined 400 baht.¹⁰⁴ The government also considered a range of other deterrents such as banishment from Bangkok to the provinces for all *nakleng*, in this case meaning recalcitrant gamblers, who had been convicted three times, 'as it is thought a good many people will think again before running that risk.'¹⁰⁵ Similarly, in contrast to

¹⁰¹ 'Ruling No. 881 & 882/131', *Thesaphiban*, 15, pp. 293-4.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*, pp. 292-4.

¹⁰³ *NT*, 5 Jan. 1917. See also *CSW*, 27 Dec. 1916.

¹⁰⁴ *BTWM*, 27 June 1924. For case in which similar fines were levied see 'Ruling No. 641 & 642/2465' *Thammasan*, 6, pp. 506-9 *BTWM*, 29 Jan. 1924. In 1923, the Bangkok Criminal Court imposed a fine as high as 2,000 baht on a repeat gambling offender and fines of 1,500 and 1,000 baht on the others convicted in the same case. This seems to have been unusually harsh, however. See 'Ruling No. 4/2466', *Thammasan*, 7, pp. 186-9.

¹⁰⁵ *BTWM*, 2 Oct. 1923.

most other offences, Vajiravudh did not grant clemency to those convicted of illegal gambling.¹⁰⁶ By the mid-1920s, a large fine and imprisonment seems to have become standard for those complicit in large-scale illegal gambling. In 1924, the Lopburi provincial court found eleven guilty of running a large den where cockfighting and the prohibited games of *thua po* and *bia bok* were conducted: all received prison sentences ranging between six months for the ringleader and one month, and fines from 1,000 to 400 baht. When the defendants appealed, however, the appellate court found the lower court's judgment to be too severe and thus lifted the prison sentences. After the prosecutor petitioned against this decision, the Supreme Court, sending out a strong message as to the appropriate punishment for major gambling offences, upheld the judgment of the provincial court, though it did reduce the ringleader's term of imprisonment to three months.¹⁰⁷ In terms of heavy penalties for serious gambling offences, legislation lagged behind the general attitude of the judiciary: recall that it was not until the 1936 gambling law was enacted that imprisonment became the standard tariff for organising most prohibited games, at least a decade after it had become the unwritten standard in court. In other words, the law was merely formalising an established pattern. This suggests that it was the judiciary, rather than the legislature, that was driving the Siamese state's increasingly punitive stance towards illegal gambling.

Around the same time, the Supreme Court tried to make imprisonment the standard for playing some banned games, particularly those formerly conducted in the gambling houses. In 1926, the Bangkok Appeals Court overturned the criminal

¹⁰⁶ *BTWM*, 19 July 1924.

¹⁰⁷ 'Ruling No. 363/2467', Borirak, [Gambling Act], pp. 51-3. Earlier that year, the Bangkok Criminal Court found three guilty of running a large *po kam* den; as a repeat offender one received four months' imprisonment and a 2,666 baht 66 satang fine, while the other two were sentenced to two months and fined 2,000 baht. 'Ruling No. 7/2467', *Ibid.*, pp. 46-8. For a further example, see 'Ruling No. 731/2469', *ibid.*, pp. 59-61.

court's decision to acquit eleven people accused of played *po kam* and fined each of them 400 baht. One defendant petitioned against this judgment. Unfortunately for him, however, the Supreme Court found there was incontrovertible proof of illegal gambling and, citing an earlier ruling – No. 228/2469 – as a precedent for imprisoning those convicted of playing *po*, sentenced the defendant to one month.¹⁰⁸ This Supreme Court ruling was in turn cited as justification for imprisoning some defendants in a similar case a couple of years later.¹⁰⁹ That the courts made a distinction between playing prohibited games and playing permitted ones without license was not lost on the population; those charged with the former might insist they had actually been playing one of the latter, no doubt in the hope of avoiding a prison sentence. In January 1934, for instance, six people up before Samut Songkhram provincial court denied playing *po kam* but admitted to playing a dice game without a license, despite all the evidence to the contrary. With the exception of a minor, all were fined and imprisoned.¹¹⁰

While a custodial sentence had become common for playing banned games by 1930, small fines remained the principal penalty for gambling without a license or in contravention of one.¹¹¹ Nevertheless, even the smallest infraction might be punished, though the fine was usually light. In 1929, for example, a man was fined five baht for gambling without a permit. His only crime, though, was to have changed the location of the card game for which he had obtained a permit; one of his children had fallen ill

¹⁰⁸ 'Ruling No. 529/2469', Borirak, [Gambling Act], pp. 56-8.

¹⁰⁹ 'Ruling No. 200/2471', *Thammasan*, 12, pp. 225-8. For more example cases of where imprisonment was imposed for playing the games formerly played in the dens see 'Ruling No. 307/2470' & 'Ruling No. 76/2472', Borirak, [Gambling Act], pp. 67-70, 84-5; *BTWM*, 27 March 1930, 22 Aug. 1936; 'Ruling No. 789/2474', *Thammasan*, 15, pp. 828-30.

¹¹⁰ Curiously the appellate court lifted the fines only for them to be restored by the Supreme Court. 'Ruling No. 731/2476', *Thammasan*, 17, pp. 980-2. For an earlier case in which the defendants tried the same tactic, also in vain, see 'Ruling No. 71/2471', *Thammasan*, 12, pp. 76-8.

¹¹¹ For example cases from the 1920s and 1930s see 'Ruling No. 4/2466', *Thammasan*, 7, pp. 5-7; 'Ruling No. 396/2468', *Thammasan*, 9, pp. 258-61; 'Ruling No. 196/2471', *Thammasan*, 12, pp. 215-17; 'Ruling No. 544/2480', *Thammasan*, 21, pp. 632-8; 'Ruling No. 362/2481', *Thammasan*, 22, pp. 554-7.

and so the game had been moved to a friend's house.¹¹² Similarly, seven were fined 16 baht each for exceeding the number of people, a maximum of six, that were specified on the card permit.¹¹³ People were also penalised for playing games that, although permitted subject to license, were not the game specified on the particular license they had obtained.¹¹⁴ These examples indicate that both the public prosecutors and the judiciary tried to ensure that the letter of the law was rigorously upheld.

Having established that the majority of gambling offences were punished with fines, it is worth considering the impact fines had upon the people of Siam. In the hierarchy of punishments, fines might have been preferable to imprisonment, which involved both a loss of liberty and the potential income that could have been earned while incarcerated, but their effects could still exceed a simple loss of money. Moreover, it is clear that not all could afford to pay and would thus find themselves imprisoned anyway. A consideration of the typical income of the general population will put the punitive effects of these fines into perspective. At the beginning of the twentieth century, the fixed daily rate for a Bangkok coolie was two salung (0.5 baht).¹¹⁵ By the end of the Fifth Reign, the average daily wage for an unskilled Bangkok labourer was 0.75 baht, rising to 1 baht a day in the mid-1920s and then falling to 0.8 baht during the 1930s.¹¹⁶ In rural areas, meanwhile, agricultural wage labourers were usually paid at least 80 baht for a season's work (9 months), with free housing and food provided by their employer, though this fell to between 30 and 60 baht a season in the depression years.¹¹⁷ From this it can be surmised that, for the

¹¹² 'Ruling No. 9/2472', *Thammasan*, 13, p. 15.

¹¹³ 'Ruling No. 113/2478', *Thammasan*, 19, pp. 171-5.

¹¹⁴ See for instance 'Ruling No. 60/2478' & 'Ruling No. 427/2478', *Thammasan*, 19, pp. 70-3, 713-18; 'Ruling No. 1689 & 1690/2479', *Thammasan*, 20, p. 1974.

¹¹⁵ Jottrand, *In Siam*, p. 284.

¹¹⁶ Batson, *End of the Absolute Monarchy*, p. 90; Constance Wilson, *Thailand: A Handbook of Historical Statistics*, Boston: G. K. Hall & Co., 1983, p. 95.

¹¹⁷ Dilok, *Rural Economy*, p. 91; Wilson, *Thailand*, p. 95.

majority of the population, even a small fine would have had a punitive impact disproportionate to the seriousness of most gambling offences. Educated professionals in Bangkok were paid more, of course. In 1922, clerks in a foreign-run store had salaries of between 60 and 90 baht per month, for instance.¹¹⁸ It is probably these people, and those better-off, to whom the *Bangkok Times* referred when it claimed: 'Many people do not mind a small fine, which is all that is inflicted in these card playing cases.'¹¹⁹ This explains why a number of Thai-language newspapers called for heavier penalties.

Besides sentencing, the judiciary was also crucial in determining whether certain activities qualified as illegal gambling. Firstly, people did not always gamble for cash, instead using edibles or other items such as cigarettes as stakes. When such cases were brought to court, it was up to the judiciary to decide whether these items counted as property (*sap-sin*) and thus whether an offence had been committed. In 1922, for instance, a woman and two men were accused of playing cards for cash without a license. The defendants admitted to playing cards but insisted they had been doing so for cakes not for money; the game had been taking place in the woman's food shop and none of them had any cash on their person. Both the *porisapha* and Bangkok Appeals Court dismissed the case on the grounds that the defendants had not been gambling for cash. Nevertheless, the prosecution petitioned the Supreme Court, claiming that cakes were a form of property and an offence had thus been committed. The Supreme Court ruled that it was impossible to determine whether the accused had been playing for cakes to eat, which was not an offence against the 1902 law, or had been playing for cakes as a property from which they might make a profit,

¹¹⁸ *BTWM*, 9 May 1922.

¹¹⁹ *BTWM*, 19 July 1924.

which might be an offence. The prosecution's appeal was thus dismissed.¹²⁰ This ruling, No. 271/2465, was subsequently used as a precedent to decide other cases in favour of the defendants.¹²¹ However, the principle that gambling had to involve some form of profit making, meaning that gambling for cigarettes or cakes amongst friends was not a wrong, was called into question by the 1930 law. Indeed, the lack of a precise definition of gambling and some ambiguous wording in this act led the Chiang Rai provincial court to find nine guilty of playing *phai pok*, a prohibited card game, despite their insistence they had been playing without stakes and there being no evidence to the contrary. After the Appeals Court upheld the lower court's judgment, it was the Supreme Court that decided no offence had been committed, based on the argument that, since the 1930 law did not clearly state that playing a forbidden game without stakes was an offence, the accused should be given the benefit of the doubt. The Supreme Court also cited the ruling discussed above to further justify its stance.¹²² The judiciary thereby established that gambling had to involve some transfer of value between the different parties.

On a similar note, the courts often had to decide whether some of the incentives shopkeepers used to encourage customers to purchase their wares qualified as gambling. Take a 1922 case concerning a machine that randomly dispensed postcards of variable quality after 10 satang (one tenth of a baht) had been inserted, for instance. The prosecution charged the owner of the machine with conducting a gambling activity similar to a raffle (*chap chalak*) illegally because some of the postcards were supposedly worth less than 10 satang and some were worth more. For his part, the accused asserted that the machine was just a means of encouraging people to buy his postcards, which were worth at least 10 satang or more.

¹²⁰ 'Ruling No. 271/2465', Borirak, [Gambling Act], pp. 41-2.

¹²¹ See, for instance, 'Ruling No. 463/2471', *ibid.*, pp. 81-3.

¹²² 'Ruling No. 1011/2474', *Thammasan*, 15, pp. 1204-6.

Additionally, if the customer was unhappy with the postcard they received, he was willing to exchange it. The first *porisapha* court dismissed the case and, although this ruling was overturned by the Appeals Court, the Supreme Court upheld the original court's decision.¹²³ Conversely, in 1925 the *porisapha* court found a man guilty of gambling illegally for selling watermelons by means of lots. Customers paid one satang and drew a lot: if it bore the number one, they received one watermelon; if it bore the number two, they received two watermelon, and so on. Citing the previous case, the Appeals Court reversed the lower courts' decision but was, once again, overruled by the Supreme Court. The latter found the accused guilty of conducting a raffle without a permit on the basis that his customers were trying their luck; if they received only one watermelon, they had effectively lost on their investment but if they received three, they had made a profit.¹²⁴ One common technique employed by shopkeepers was to insert banknotes or coupons entitling the holder to a prize of some sort into some packets of produce, such as bars of soap or packages of dried longan fruit. The Supreme Court decided this type of gambling case on the principle that offering free gifts to lucky customers was not an offence so long as the products on which the gift was offered were not sold for more than their market price.¹²⁵ In other words, for an action to be considered gambling both parties had to have a chance of making a profit at the others expense. The legislative side of the government was clearly not satisfied with this, however, for the 1936 law made it an offence to offer prizes to customers randomly unless prior permission from the

¹²³ 'Ruling No. 623/2465', Borirak, [Gambling Act], pp. 43-5.

¹²⁴ 'Ruling No. 583/2468', *Thammasan*, 9, pp. 422-5. This ruling was then used as a precedent in a 1930 case. See 'Ruling No. 836/2473', *Thammasan*, 14, pp. 539-42.

¹²⁵ *Thammasan*, 17, pp. 1180-3. For cases in which this principle was applied see 'Ruling No. 653/2475', *Thammasan*, 16, pp. 635-7; 'Ruling No. 818/2476', *Thammasan*, 17, pp. 1176-80; 'Ruling No. 142/2479', *Thammasan*, 20, p. 205.

authorities had been obtained.¹²⁶ By most definitions this practice was not gambling but the Siamese government regulated it in order to prevent retailers from taking advantage of their customers and to ensure it did not cross the line into gambling.¹²⁷ By adhering strictly to the letter of the law, the courts thereby exposed defects and loopholes in the existing legislation that might then be corrected by a new law.

The courts also played a role in determining the legality of games not specified in the legislation but which the prosecution deemed sufficiently similar to games that were listed for an offence to have been committed.¹²⁸ On the whole, the courts seemed to have erred on the side of caution, dismissing most such cases on the grounds that any similarity had not been proven.¹²⁹ Indeed, as mentioned in Chapter 3, this attitude on the part of the judiciary was used by others in the administration to highlight the deficiency of the gambling laws and, in turn, cited as a reason for issuing new legislation that prohibited all forms of gambling, without having to mention specific forms. By highlighting that a particular game was not covered by the existing legislation, the judiciary might then prompt the government to include it in a future law. This was the case with *yon chim*, a game of skill in which the players would pitch coins onto a checkerboard or other similar surface. In 1927, the Supreme Court judged that the method of playing *yon chim* was not similar to the dice games *si ngao lak* or *khluak khlik*, listed in the 1902 law, and, accordingly, could be played

¹²⁶ PKPS, 48, p. 1774. The penalty for violating this provision was a maximum prison sentence of one month, a fine between 50 and 2,000 baht or both. Ibid., p. 1777.

¹²⁷ Chumphon, [Descriptions], p. 9.

¹²⁸ Under the 1902 law, any games similar to those specified as forbidden were also prohibited. Under the 1930 and 1936 laws, meanwhile, any games that were similar to those permitted subject to license also required a license. See PKPS, 18, pp. 264-5, 270, 548; 20, pp. 508-9; 43, pp. 143-4; 48, pp. 1773-4.

¹²⁹ See, for example, 'Ruling No. 600/2467' & 'Ruling No. 5/2470', Borirak, [Gambling Act], pp. 54-5, 65-6; 'Ruling No. 525/2475', *Thammasan*, 16, pp. 478-80; 'Ruling No. 1281/2479', *Thammasan*, 20, pp. 1515-17; 'Ruling No. 445/2480', *Thammasan*, 21, pp. 452-5; 'Ruling No. 364/2483', *Thammasan*, 24, p. 526.

without a license.¹³⁰ Under the 1930 law, however, *yon chim* was placed on the banned list.¹³¹ In other cases, the courts' ruling on the legal status of an unlisted game preceded appropriate legislation. In 1916, for instance, the first *porisapha* court found four Chinese who had been gambling on mah-jong – in Thai, called *phai ma chiak* or, more commonly, *phai nok krachok* – to be guilty of gambling without a license, despite the fact that mah-jong was not specified in the current law.¹³² Mah-jong subsequently joined *yon chim* on the permitted subject to license list of the 1930 law.¹³³ In these instances, the judiciary had a semi-legislative function. Overall, it played a critical role in defining what constituted gambling exactly.

Disciplining Government Officials

As mentioned earlier, the status and privilege of Siamese royals, nobles and government officials impeded state efforts to enforce the gambling laws. But this was perhaps the least of the problems that their participation in gambling, both legal and illegal, presented the Siamese government. Firstly, it was well aware that gambling by these high-ranking members of society undermined efforts to discourage others from giving up the vice and could lead to accusations of hypocrisy.¹³⁴ At worst, this might involve those state officials charged with upholding the law actually breaking it themselves. Such was the case in 1918, when Chao Phraya Aphairacha (M. R. W.

¹³⁰ 'Ruling No. 5/2470', Borirak, [Gambling Act], pp. 65-6.

¹³¹ *PKPS*, 43, p. 149. Similarly, the Supreme Court also ruled in 1927 that the game *saba-chut* was not similar to *si ngao lak* or *khli saba*, listed in the 1893 law. *Saba-chut* was subsequently listed as requiring a license under the 1930 law. Curiously, it was then omitted from the 1936 law only to be shortly re-listed by the second edition of the ministerial regulations. See 'Ruling No. 413/2470', Borirak, [Gambling Act], pp. 75-7; *PKPS*, 43, p. 150; 48, pp. 1779-81; 49, pp. 254-5.

¹³² *NT*, 17 & 28 Oct. 1916, 20 Nov. 1916.

¹³³ *PKPS*, 43, p. 150.

¹³⁴ For instance, Chulalongkorn noted that as long as the nobles and government officials continued to gamble, commoners would believe it was perfectly acceptable to do likewise. Similarly, a 1926 report asserted that gambling by officials set a poor example to their wives and children. See King Chulalongkorn, *Phithi songkran* [Songkran ceremonies], Bangkok: Cremation Volume for Bamrung Sisombun, 1978, p. 96; and NA R.7 Kh.2/2, 'Ideas about suppressing gambling'.

Lop Suthat), the Minister of Justice from June 1912 to May 1926, informed the king about a judge and a public prosecutor in Samut Songkhram province who had confessed to gambling illegally.¹³⁵ Besides making a mockery of the government's restrictionist policy, gambling by officials often led them into debt, fraud and corruption. In turn, this undermined the functioning of the state and tarnished its legitimacy. In 1903, for instance, a treasury official in the town of Lang Suan, monthon Chumphon, was found to have embezzled over 1,500 baht from the local education budget and then gambled it away. Consequently, local teachers did not receive their monthly salary.¹³⁶ Gambling had a particularly detrimental effect upon the fledgling police force of the 1890s and early 1900s. In his 1901/2 annual report, Lawson observed, with regard to Siamese as opposed to Lao policemen, that:

gambling is generally the cause, not only of the desertions, but most of the serious crime in the force. What happens is this. A man gets his pay and goes straight to the gambling house. He loses all his previous month's pay, cannot pay his debts, and, consequently, cannot get any one to give him any more credit. Seeing no way of getting out of the difficulty, he runs away. Sometimes instead of running away he steals.¹³⁷

Lastly, as Chapter 5 will illustrate, the hypocrisy and corruption that gambling fostered among the upper echelons of Siamese society gave the popular press of the 1910s and 1920s ample ammunition for its critiques of the absolutist social order. Given all these reasons, it was imperative that the absolute monarchy be seen to take a hard line against gambling by officials.

How to prevent royals and officials from becoming too embroiled in gambling had been a concern of the state long before this wave of press criticism.¹³⁸ The

¹³⁵ NA R.6 N.4.1/9, 'Aphairacha to Vajiravudh, 8 July 1918'.

¹³⁶ Kanchana, [Government Policy], pp. 112-13.

¹³⁷ *RPAB* 120 [1901/2], p. 11. Commenting on the dismissal of two officers in 1904/5, Lawson noted that 'both were ruined by gambling'. *RPAB* 123 [1904/5], p. 7.

¹³⁸ Near the start of Rama I's reign, for example, government officials were prohibited from gambling in the gambling houses. The penalty of transgressions was 90 lashes and tattooing on the forehead. Damrong, [Abolition], p. 13.

decision to enforce the law against playing *thua po* outside the gambling houses during the various New Year festivities in 1896 was partly motivated by a desire to discourage officials from taking part.¹³⁹ Moreover, the gambling house and lottery hall regulations issued in the 1890s prohibited any off-duty policemen or soldiers from entering these establishments while in uniform.¹⁴⁰ Attempts to enforce these rules often led to the police stationed in the dens being assaulted by soldiers wishing to enter.¹⁴¹ Until the 1920s, though, there were no such restrictions on civilian officials. And, of course, there was nothing to stop police or army men from taking part in all the gambling activities conducted outside the gambling houses. Indeed, if the Thai-language press is to be believed, state officials were some of the most inveterate gamblers in the country. That this was a problem was confirmed in a 1926 government report which attributed the increase in the number of officials driven into financial ruin over the previous ten years to gambling.¹⁴²

During the Sixth Reign, the government seems to have dealt with officials' involvement in illicit gambling on a case-by-case basis. Available sources indicate that those convicted for gambling offences were, upon approval from the king, stripped of their rank and dismissed from government service. In early 1918, for instance, a police captain was found guilty of conspiring to set up an underground *thua po* den. The Bangkok Criminal Court sentenced him to two month's imprisonment and fined him 800 baht, in addition to him paying a 100 baht reward. The police captain was subsequently dismissed.¹⁴³ Additionally, it seems that officials received heavier penalties than ordinary citizens. For example, a *kamnan* was sentenced to six month's imprisonment for playing a banned game, in addition to a

¹³⁹ NA R.5 N.11.3.K/2, 'Chulalongkorn to Prince Phitthayalap, 10 July 1895'.

¹⁴⁰ PKPS, 13, pp. 56, 277, 281.

¹⁴¹ RPAB 1898-99, p. 44.

¹⁴² NA R.7 Kh.2/2, 'Ideas about suppressing gambling'.

¹⁴³ NA R.6 N.4.1/9, 'Yomarat to Prachin, 1 Feb. 1918'; 'Vajiravudh to Yomarat, 6 March 1918'.

fine, while his fellow gamblers were merely fined.¹⁴⁴ Sometimes just a hint of wrongdoing was sufficient for action to be taken. In the case of the judge and public prosecutor who confessed to illegal gambling mentioned above, another official was implicated simply because he had been present and the Minister of Justice urged that he also be dismissed.¹⁴⁵ The dictum of there being no smoke without fire was also applied to the case of the two Phrayas in 1923, referred to earlier. Both Phraya Phuban Banthoeng and Phraya Mahathep held important positions within the royal household and the Wild Tigers, and, as will be shown in Chapter 5, the case provoked great excitement within some sections of the popular press. Both were charged with being accessory to the underground dens that had operated on their estates, indeed it was implied that they were the effective heads of the gambling ring. While Phraya Phuban Banthoeng was found guilty, and sentenced to two month's imprisonment and a 2,000 baht fine, Phraya Mahathep was acquitted due to doubts about the witnesses' testimony.¹⁴⁶ Nevertheless, the latter's reputation had been tarnished and, because he had also previously displeased the king, the feeling within the royal court was that an example needed to be set. Vajiravudh thus ordered that both officials be dismissed from office and stripped of all their ranks, although Phraya Mahathep was allowed to retain his title.¹⁴⁷ Yet, despite this warning, gambling by government officials remained a problem.

Upon coming to the throne, Prajadhipok took a number of steps to reverse this trend, instituting formal procedures for dealing with state officials implicated in illegal gambling. First, in April 1926, the king ruled that although officials may have

¹⁴⁴ *BTWM*, 27 June 1924.

¹⁴⁵ NA R.6 N.4.1/9, 'Aphairacha to Vajiravudh, 8 July 1918'.

¹⁴⁶ NA R.6 N.4.1/9, 'Chao Phraya Thammathikon to Vajiravudh, 12 Sept. 1923'.

¹⁴⁷ NA R.6 N.4.1/9, 'Vajiravudh to Thammathikon, 13 Sept. 1923'. The public prosecutor later successfully appealed against Phraya Mahathep's acquittal. The official received the same sentence as Phraya Phuban Banthoeng. *BTWM*, 12 Nov. 1923.

been only an accessory to gambling offences – by letting others gamble in their residence, for instance – they should be severely reprimanded and even stripped of their rank or dismissed.¹⁴⁸ Later that year, Prajadhipok went further. Concerned about the increasing number of officials that were gambling, getting into debt and then being accused of embezzling government funds, the king believed that anyone who was a hardcore gambler (*pen nakleng kanphanan*) was unfit to be an official. He ruled that if there was any hint of gambling on their part, they were to be censured. More significantly, any official charged with illegal gambling was to be expelled from office, regardless of whether the court found them guilty.¹⁴⁹ Records show both these rulings were applied. In October 1929, an air-force officer was acquitted of playing cards illegally only for Prajadhipok to order that he be dismissed.¹⁵⁰ Officials so accused had to undergo intense scrutiny. For example, although the appellate court upheld a lower court's decision to dismiss a case of illegal gambling against a finance official, the Ministry of Finance still examined every aspect of the verdicts in order to establish whether there had been any factual basis for the prosecution. Only then was that official reinstated.¹⁵¹ This hard-line stance does not seem to have been effective, though. There was a steady stream of government officials prosecuted for illegal gambling throughout the Seventh Reign.¹⁵² Additionally, many officials took the concession for unlicensed card-playing between family and friends under the 1930 gambling law to mean that it was acceptable for them to gamble freely once more.

¹⁴⁸ NA MT.2.2/1, 'Mahithon to Lopburi, 21 April 1926'.

¹⁴⁹ *Thesaphiban*, 31, pp. 234-6.

¹⁵⁰ NA R.7 Y.4/7, 'Cover sheet – Royal Order, 5 Oct. 1929'; 'Chinda to Mahithon, 4 Oct. 1929'. For a similar case see NA R.7 Y.4/2, 'Summary of criminal cases, 6 Dec. 1926'.

¹⁵¹ NA R.7 Y.4/2, 'Summary of criminal cases, 10 Jan. 1927'.

¹⁵² See, for instance, NA R.7 Y.4/2, 'Summaries of criminal cases, 1 May 1926, 28 March 1927, 15 Feb. 1928, 25 Sept. 1928 & 2 March 1929'; NA R.7 Y.4/7, 'Chinda to Mahithon, 7 March 1930, 6 Jan. 1931'; 'Chao Phraya Sithamma Thibet [Chinda] to Mahithon, 7 June 1932'.

The Ministry of the Interior was thus forced to issue an order in June 1931 that reaffirmed the 1926 one.¹⁵³

Gambling by officials remained a concern in the post-1932 era. Since the constitutional regime's legitimacy rested partly on its claims that it represented a clean break from the hypocrisy of the absolutist order, it was vital that the fledgling government try to eradicate the iniquities of its predecessor. The cabinet issued a series of regulations, first in 1934 and again in 1938, that instructed all heads of departments to monitor the gambling of their subordinates. In any cases where it was deemed that the government's work was being adversely affected by an official's habit, even if it was legal gambling, that person was to be disciplined, with the threat of salary deductions or dismissal.¹⁵⁴ Moreover, certain officials, such as teachers and police officers, were prohibited from all forms of gambling, or indirectly having a stake in some gaming activity. Again, violations were liable to be punished with dismissal.¹⁵⁵

To sum up, these increasingly strict regulations governing gambling by officials reflected a number of government concerns, perhaps the most important being the fear of gambling, both legal and illegal, as a cause of corruption. Additionally, these regulations are indicative of state efforts to impose standards of acceptable behaviour within the bureaucracy and the military; the idea that those in government service should be above vices such as gambling. As the cases discussed above show, however, government officials were as human as the next person.

¹⁵³ *Thesaphiban*, 31, pp. 236-7.

¹⁵⁴ *Thesaphiban*, 34, pp. 1162-64(k); *BTWM*, 25 Oct. 1938.

¹⁵⁵ NA MT.2.2/1, 'Report on regulations for gambling by officials'; 'Secretary of Civil Service Commission to Undersecretary of the Interior, 5 Sept. 1938'.

Behind Bars

This section will follow the convicted gambling offender into the kingdom's prisons to examine the role of the penal administration within the government's gambling policy. During the 1890s, Chulalongkorn initiated a series of penal reforms to curb the abuses that plagued the traditional system; warders were now given salaries, for instance, rather than having to rely on prisoners' labour and bribes for remuneration. The first modern prison, the Bangkok Central Prison, which was modelled on Singapore's colonial prison, was opened in the same period. Similar prisons were later established in all the major provincial centres and the notorious Bang Kwang Prison for long-term convicts was opened in 1930.¹⁵⁶

Gambling, along with other vices such as smoking opium and marijuana, was rife within the Siamese penal system. In 1902, Lawson commented on the jails in Bangkok's suburbs as follows:

In these jails a good many luxuries are provided.... at a certain gaol I have myself seen the excellent cockfighting ground provided for the use of the prisoners, on which the prisoners nightly pit their fighting cocks against each other. Houses for their wives are also provided, and they all have as much tobacco and opium as they like.¹⁵⁷

Little appears to have changed almost thirty years later when a couple of newspapers carried exposés of prison conditions. After conducting interviews with prisoners and warders from various provincial prisons, a journalist for the *Ratsadon* newspaper wrote an article in 1928 entitled 'The State of Provincial Prisons'.¹⁵⁸ Amongst a list of other abuses, he observed that: 'prisons are excellent gambling dens. You [the convict] can gamble whenever you wish without having to ask for permission from anybody. You are better off than people on the outside who always have to ask for

¹⁵⁶ Steve Van Beek, *Bangkok Then and Now*, Bangkok: A B Publications, 1999, pp. 96-7.

¹⁵⁷ NA R.5 N.8.1/216, 'Special Report on Crime in the two Divisions of the Suburbs with recommendations with a view to reduce Crime and improve the administration of Criminal Justice and Police'.

¹⁵⁸ For the complete article see *Ratsadon*, 14 & 17 Dec. 1928.

permission from officials before gambling.¹⁵⁹ In a similar article the same year, *Si krung* likened the kingdom's prisons to training schools for criminals. For the writer, the purpose of prison was to act as a deterrent to wrongdoers and discourage those incarcerated from re-offending once they were released. However, using the example of Samut Prakan provincial prison, the writer identified three factors that undermined any efforts at reform. First was the prevalence of gambling; Samut Prakan prison had a large, permanent den with all the equipment for games of *thua po*, dice, cards, fish-fighting and so on. Second was the widespread use of opium and marijuana, which were sold openly and were constantly available. Lastly, the intimidation and bullying of new prisoners by long-term convicts ensured that the former would feel pressurised into taking up gambling or drugs.¹⁶⁰ If a convict was not a compulsive gambler before entering prison, the chances were they would be by the time they left.

Such widespread violation of prison regulations and the law could not have escaped the notice of the penal authorities. Indeed, on occasion they were complicit in these illicit activities. On 21 October 1930, for instance, the police conducted a raid on Singburi provincial prison and found 40 to 50 convicts gambling. Amongst those arrested was Nai Am, a prison warder implicated as the organiser and banker.¹⁶¹ The subsequent investigation concluded that the gambling was encouraged by a shortage of manpower and the negligence of the prison staff, especially the jailer. Nai Am, the warder, and the prisoners had often gambled in the past but previous attempts to catch them in the act had failed. A spy had therefore been placed inside to monitor them.¹⁶² Moreover, the superintendent had little faith in the abilities of the jailer to deal with

¹⁵⁹ *Ratsadon*, 17 Dec. 1928.

¹⁶⁰ *Si krung*, 16 Aug. 1928.

¹⁶¹ NA MT.4.5/13, 'Extract from *Si krung*, 28 Oct. 1930'.

¹⁶² NA MT.4.5/13, 'Superintendent of Singburi prison to Prince Upphatthaphong, Lord Lieutenant of monthon Ayutthaya, 11 Nov. 1930'.

the gamblers and their arrest was thus entrusted to the local police.¹⁶³ Charges were subsequently brought against Nai Am and eight convicts. All pleaded guilty; the warder and one convict received two months' imprisonment for their part as organisers, while the others received one month.¹⁶⁴ The investigation also revealed that another warder had known of the gambling ring but had failed to report it to his superiors. His salary was cut by five baht.¹⁶⁵

Besides the prison staff's negligence, the other problem was a lack of manpower. Although the Singburi prison had the full complement of nine warders, only five, including Nai Am, were present when the raid occurred. The other four were supervising extramural convict labour. Normally, only one warder would be on guard detail like this but, during October, the provincial authorities had been preparing for a visit by Prince Lopburi. Extra convict labourers, with warders to manage them, had been requisitioned to ensure all the outside preparatory work was completed in time. The prison was thus critically short-staffed at the time of the raid and it was decided that the gambling could not be solely blamed on the negligence or incompetence of the jailer.¹⁶⁶ Nevertheless, the investigation failed to consider any underlying reasons why gambling was rife within Singburi prison and other penal institutions.¹⁶⁷ For the prisoners, gambling was a break from the monotony of life inside. This can also be said for the warders who spent long hours in their company. Furthermore, providing convicts with opportunities to indulge in opium and gambling was a way of supplementing their salary. It can also be seen as an informal method of

¹⁶³ NA MT.4.5/13, 'Superintendent to Upphatthaphong, 1 Dec. 1930'.

¹⁶⁴ Ibid.

¹⁶⁵ NA MT.4.5/13, 'Superintendent to Upphatthaphong, 16 Dec. 1930'.

¹⁶⁶ NA MT.4.5/13, 'Luang Phiphat to Phra Borihanthanant, 10 Dec. 1930'; 'Superintendent to Upphatthaphong, 16 Dec. 1930'.

¹⁶⁷ This problem persisted under the constitutional regime. In 1933, for instance, a convict in Mahasarakham prison informed on some inmates for gambling. NA MT.2.3.13/2, 'Lord Lieutenant of monthon Nakhon Ratchasima to Minister of the Interior, 10 Aug. 1933'.

control. Convicts who were addicted to opium were less likely to cause trouble so long as they received their fix. While gambling certainly had the potential to cause arguments, if it was run correctly large numbers of prisoners could be engaged in an activity that required little warder supervision.

Following the 1932 coup, the new constitutional government launched a programme of prison reform with the aim of improving the moral and industrial training of convicts.¹⁶⁸ Greater efforts were made to ensure prisoners received a basic level of education. Recognising that most had had no previous opportunity to study, the government sought to give them the necessary skills to make an honest living once freed, rather than having to resort to crime.¹⁶⁹ A special curriculum was drawn up that was designed to provide a primary level (*prathom*) education in two years. Subjects included reading, writing, and arithmetic, along with science, knowledge of the country, and ethics. This latter subject ranged from instruction in manners and etiquette to the work ethic and thriftiness. The aims of this last class were to encourage care for the home, tools and clothes, to dissuade spendthrift behaviour, and to encourage saving. Gambling was to be avoided.¹⁷⁰ There is no indication of how successful this education programme was, however. Given the prevalence of gambling within prisons, it can be assumed it had little effect in stopping people from doing it. Rather than being a solution to the gambling problem, imprisonment was part of the problem.

Gambling, Buddhism and the Sangha

According to the Buddha's teachings, gambling is one of four vices which lead to certain self-ruin and destruction; in Thai these are collectively known as *abaiyamuk*,

¹⁶⁸ Thompson, *Thailand*, p. 289.

¹⁶⁹ NA MT.4/46, 'Penitentiary Department to Chao Khun Prichanusat, Jan. 1934'.

¹⁷⁰ NA MT.4.46, [Curriculum for Primary Level Education of Prisoners].

which literally means 'the portals of hell'.¹⁷¹ For the layperson, gambling is thus something to be avoided if one wishes to lead a life free of suffering. Moreover, it is generally considered that gambling comes under the strictures against stealing, the second of the five precepts (*sin ha*) that underlie the Thai Buddhist system of morality and that should be observed by all meritorious individuals.¹⁷² As should be apparent by now though, these proscriptions fell largely on deaf ears within Siamese society. This final section will argue that this was partly due to the monkhood's implicit condoning of gambling, at both an individual and institutional level.

For monks, the position on gambling is much clearer: it is something that is forbidden under the rules governing monastic behaviour.¹⁷³ In addition, these religious injunctions were joined by a number of secular laws prohibiting monks from various forms of gambling; offenders were disrobed and punished as a layperson.¹⁷⁴ The regulations for the gambling houses and the *huai* issued during the early 1890s forbade the tax farmers and their employees from allowing monks to enter the dens or the lottery hall.¹⁷⁵ But, despite these religious and legal sanctions, gambling by monks was commonplace. In his memoirs, Phraya Anuman Rajadhon recalls how monks often placed stakes on the *huai*, for instance.¹⁷⁶ Similarly, the American Hermann Norden, who visited Siam during the Sixth Reign, notes how he often came across monks 'just around the corner from a Wat [temple], engaged in a sport that looked to

¹⁷¹ Chumphon, [Descriptions], p. 7; Kanchana, [Government Policy], p. 110 n. 52; George Bradley McFarland (ed.), *Thai-English Dictionary*, Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1944, p. 964.

¹⁷² For a discussion of these five precepts and their influence upon Thai behaviour see B. J. Terwiel, *Monks and Magic: An Analysis of Religious Ceremonies in Central Thailand*, 3rd revised edition, Bangkok: White Lotus, 1994, pp. 161-71. Based on his anthropological fieldwork, Terwiel concludes that: 'The general attitude seems to be that full adherence to the five precepts is not compatible with ordinary daily life and that people should not be sanctimonious.' *Ibid.*, p. 169.

¹⁷³ The proscription against gambling is one of the 227 precepts for monks detailed in the Pali *Patimokkha*. *Ibid.*, pp. 95-7.

¹⁷⁴ See for instance the prohibition on monks and novices participating in cock, bird and fish fighting. *PKPS*, 5, pp. 16-18. Abbots were also condemned for the misconduct of their charges.

¹⁷⁵ *PKPS*, 13, pp. 56, 277, 281.

¹⁷⁶ Sthirakoses, *Looking Back*, p. 157.

me uncommonly like shooting craps', and being sorely tempted to join in.¹⁷⁷ As mentioned in Chapter 3, monks were also to be seen placing bets at the horse-races. While this was hardly saintly behaviour, it is not surprising, for not all who became monks did so out of religious piety. As one Westerner claimed in 1906, 'many enter the monasteries from no other motive than laziness, and some belong to the lowest criminal class who hope thus to escape from justice. These are the men who bring the monasteries into ill repute.'¹⁷⁸ Being ordained was also a way of avoiding conscription, something D. E. Malloch alluded to when he stated: 'I believe three-fourths of all the Talapains [monks] in Siam enter the priesthood with a view of avoiding hard labour'.¹⁷⁹ Carl Bock, meanwhile, asserted that men would enter the monkhood in order to get rid of their debts: 'they apply to some one who wishes to make merit with Buddha and induce him to pay the debt on condition of "taking orders"'.¹⁸⁰

Monks took part not only in public, legal gambling. Kanchana highlights how sprawling temple grounds were an excellent location for illicit gambling because they provided many secluded places far from prying eyes.¹⁸¹ But this was no guarantee of avoiding arrest. In 1912, for instance, the Phetchabun town court found a monk and a novice guilty of playing *bia bok*, a banned game, along with six laypeople, in the main chapel of their temple during the night. The two miscreants had denied the charges, claiming they had seen light coming from the chapel and, fearing it was a fire, had gone to investigate. It was then they had been arrested. Despite their protestations, there was sufficient evidence to convict them; the court ordered both to

¹⁷⁷ Norden, *From Golden Gate to Golden Sun*, p. 111.

¹⁷⁸ Thompson, *Lotus Land*, p. 117. See also Buls, *Siamese Sketches*, p. 64.

¹⁷⁹ D. E. Malloch, *Siam: Some General Remarks on its Production and particularly on its Imports and Exports and the Mode of Transacting Business with the People*, Calcutta: Baptist Mission Press, 1852, p. 10.

¹⁸⁰ Bock, *Temples and Elephants*, p. 101.

¹⁸¹ Kanchana, [Government Policy], p. 117.

pay a fine of 100 baht. In one final attempt to escape punishment, the monk pointed out that religious precepts forbade monks from possessing money and thus neither of them could pay. Furthermore, it was not permitted to imprison them in lieu of payment. Final judgment in a case such as this was the duty of the king: Vajiravudh ordered that the two be expelled from the monkhood and then punished accordingly.¹⁸²

Clearly, such misconduct had a deleterious effect upon the Buddhist religion and the standing of the monkhood.¹⁸³ It also set a terrible example for the lay population. Consequently, it was of grave concern for both the religious and secular authorities. In 1896, for instance, the Ministry of Public Instruction and Religion issued orders reminding the police to arrest any monk committing a range of listed offences. These included betting on the *huai*, and either entering a gambling house or getting someone else to place a bet for him.¹⁸⁴ Similarly, just prior to the annual fair at Wat Benchamabophit in 1903, the Ministry ordered the police to be rigorous in preventing monks from gambling during the festivities.¹⁸⁵ These repeated instructions to the police indicated that, due to the great respect accorded to the monkhood, officers were loath to arrest miscreant monks. Commenting on the failure of two constables to arrest a monk who was drunk and disorderly in the lottery hall, Lawson explained that: 'I think the reverence they feel for the priestly office was the cause of their dereliction of duty.'¹⁸⁶ With regards to monks attending the horse-races during the early 1920s, the Sangha sought to circumvent the problem by prohibiting monks

¹⁸² NA R.5-6 RL-Kh.Ph/17, 'Prince Sawat [Svasti] to Vajiravudh, 3 June 1912'; 'Vajiravudh to Sawat, 30 June 1912'.

¹⁸³ Gambling was just the tip of the iceberg when it came to monastic transgressions. The historical record provides numerous examples of monks getting drunk, smoking opium, fornicating, bearing arms, and even fighting. See, for instance, *PKPS*, 6, pp. 164-7; *Siam Repository*, 1869, pp. 352-3; NA R.5 N.49.5/48, 'Phraya Wisut Suriyasuk to Phraya Intharathipbodi, 17 Sept. 1903'.

¹⁸⁴ NA R.5 N.49.5/15, 'Naret to Phra Anan, 10 Aug. 1896'.

¹⁸⁵ NA R.5 N.49.5/50, 'Wisut to Intharathipbodi, 1 Dec. 1903'.

¹⁸⁶ NA R.5 N.8.1/370, 'Lawson to Nares [Naret], 30 May 1906'.

or novices from watching any form of entertainment, such as films, or sporting event that required paying an admission fee. The police were to assist in bringing any offenders before the respective abbot, who had instructions to disrobe them.¹⁸⁷

However, the damage done to state policy by the gambling habits of some reprobate monks was not nearly as great as that done by the presence of gambling stalls at temple fairs. The Belgian traveller Charles Buls described such an event in Bangkok around the turn of the twentieth century as follows: 'Around this place of pilgrimage are crowded the elements of a fancy fair, especially gambling tables with the most varied games: cards, dice, lottery numbers, turnstiles, roulette – the complete collection of all imaginable tricks to pluck the idiot possessed by the demon of gambling.'¹⁸⁸ The purpose of these fairs was to raise money for temple, often so that repairs to buildings might be carried out.¹⁸⁹ Although gambling at such events had been going on since time immemorial, Kanchana suggests there was a marked increase after the 1902 gambling law came into force.¹⁹⁰ By formalising the procedure for organising gambling at religious and secular festivals, this law may have inadvertently encouraged applications for permits. As with the similar, secular events discussed in Chapter 3, only Class 2 gambling was allowed; this was mostly gambling for prizes but, occasionally, gambling for cash was permitted.¹⁹¹ Perhaps more significant was that gambling was allowed at the Wat Benchamabophit fair, held annually from around the turn of the twentieth century. This temple was the most important of those built during the Fifth Reign and had strong associations with the

¹⁸⁷ NA R.6 N.2/120, 'Declaration for all abbots, 9 Aug. 1923'.

¹⁸⁸ Buls, *Siamese Sketches*, p. 35.

¹⁸⁹ See for instance NA R.5 N.7.7.Ng/12, 'Phra Ratsadakonkoson to Naret, 13 Feb. 1904'; NA R.5 N.7.7.Ng/22, 'Luang Senaphonsitthi to Naret, 23 April 1905'.

¹⁹⁰ Kanchana, [Government Policy], p. 111.

¹⁹¹ See NA R.5 N.49.5/59, 'Lawson to Nares [Naret], 4 Nov. 1904' in which Lawson raises concerns as to whether gambling for cash was to be permitted at the Wat Yuen fair: 'If so the same very disgraceful scenes as those witnessed last year at the Pu-Kow-Tong [the Golden Mount] festival will occur again.'

royal family. Its annual fair, which was regularly attended by Chulalongkorn, thus set a benchmark for what was acceptable. Indeed, when gambling at the fair was discontinued in the late 1900s, this was cited as the reason for denying permission for gambling at other temple fairs within the Greater Bangkok area.¹⁹² One of the most significant temple fairs of the 1920s and 1930s, if not before, was that held during November on the site of the great stupa, Phra Pathom Chedi, in the provincial town of Nakhon Pathom. Every year, people from neighbouring provinces and the capital would descend upon the town to indulge in gambling. In 1923, the *Sayam rat* reported how every train from Bangkok to the town was packed but people were quite happy to stand.¹⁹³ That year there were over 100 gaming stalls offering all the favourites, such as *hi-lo* and *huai chap yiki*. The total rent from these stalls amounted to 57,750 baht, part of which went to the temple and part to the development of public facilities.¹⁹⁴ Needless to say, the presence of gambling at these temple fairs amounted to the Sangha condoning the vice, in direct contravention of Buddhist principles. As the *Bangkok Times* observed in connection with the Nakhon Pathom fair: 'It appears strange that such things should be connected with a Festival of Preaching'.¹⁹⁵

It would be unfair to hold the monkhood solely responsible for this state of affairs. Indeed, in most cases, these events were organised by laypeople, usually government officials and local nobles, on behalf of the temples.¹⁹⁶ But gambling at temple fairs received little or no condemnation from the monkhood and would surely

¹⁹² NA R.5 N.7.7.Ng/28, 'Naret to Ratsadakonkoson, 19 Jan. 1907'; NA R.5 N.7.7.Ng/31, 'Naret to Ratsadakonkoson, 27 March 1907'; NA R.5 N.49.5/84, 'Order No. 13/17958, 10 Dec. 1908'.

¹⁹³ *Sayam rat*, 23 Nov. 1923.

¹⁹⁴ *KDM*, 25 Nov. 1923.

¹⁹⁵ *BTWM*, 24 Nov. 1923.

¹⁹⁶ The Nakhon Pathom festival, for instance, was organised by a twelve-man committee that included the Lord Lieutenant of monthon Nakhon Chaisi and the governor of the province. The failed application for a Class 2 gambling permit at the Wat Mun Lek fair in Bangkok, meanwhile, was made by the local headman. NA R.5 N.7.7.Ng/28, 'Naret to Ratsadakonkoson, 19 June 1907'.

have required the abbot's consent for the temple grounds to be used for such purposes. While one monk at the 1922 Nakhon Pathom fair may have 'waxed indignant and condemned the placing of the tables on the Pagoda premises at all',¹⁹⁷ he seems to have been a lone dissenting voice. To make matters worse, in some cases it was the monks themselves who organised the gaming. This was the case at a temple fair in 1925 in the southern province of Phang Nga where gambling went on for a whole week, 'both in and under priest's houses [sic], there being as many as ten circles going at a time – as many as one would see at the Tapan Lek [gambling] house in Bangkok in the old days.'¹⁹⁸ This was not so much condoning the vice as actively endorsing it and made a mockery of Buddhist precepts and state efforts to restrict it.

In summary, the state agencies charged with the enforcement of Siam's gambling laws laboured under an array of institutional problems that served to impede the government's restrictionist policy. Inadequate pay within the police force and, speculatively, within the penal administration made these two institutions susceptible to the corrupting influence of illicit gambling enterprises. Indeed, following the abolition of the gambling tax farms, illegal gambling flourished due to police support. In the process, the police assumed a vested interest in many forms of gambling remaining illegal. The prevalence of gambling within Siam's penal institutions also nurtured this habit within the convict population. Similarly, the use of gambling as a fundraiser for temple works, coupled with the misbehaviour of individual monks, undermined government policy. Conversely, the judiciary worked hard to apply the kingdom's gambling laws equitably and in doing so highlighted deficiencies in the legislation that were, in some cases, corrected by future legislation.

¹⁹⁷ *BTWM*, 24 Nov. 1923.

¹⁹⁸ *BTWM*, 4 Sept. 1925.

It also strove to suppress gambling through imposing increasingly severe sentences on gambling offenders.

5

The Press and Public Opinion

This chapter will explore the influence of the Siamese press and public opinion upon government gambling policy. In their studies of the development of the print media and the creation of a public sphere in early twentieth century Siam, Matthew Copeland and Scott Barmé have illustrated how the nascent Bangkok middle class used the media to challenge the discursive authority of the Siamese ruling elite.¹ In the newspapers, novels, magazines and films of the 1920s and early 1930s, educated and politically aware commoners mounted a sustained critique of the absolute monarchy and the social order it fostered, casting the former as 'an archaic, repressive institution which impeded Siam's progress' and the latter as 'moribund and profoundly corrupt.'² After detailing the creation and articulation of a popular nationalism within the Thai-language press that sharply opposed the official nationalism espoused by the absolute monarchy, Copeland concludes his study by noting the great variety of other hotly debated issues that reflected the socio-political malaise of the times and provided critics of absolutism with ammunition for their attacks.³ As the first part of this chapter will show, gambling was one of those issues. Nevertheless, it would be misleading to say that the Bangkok media spoke for the broader, rural population. The second part of this chapter will therefore draw on a wider range of sources so that the whisper of the silent majority might be heard.

¹ Copeland, 'Contested Nationalism'; Barmé, *Woman, Man, Bangkok*.

² Barmé, *Woman, Man, Bangkok*, p. 2.

³ Copeland, 'Contested Nationalism', p. 209.

The Development of the Siamese Press

Before examining the debate on gambling it is worth considering the general development of the Siamese press, its relationship with the government, and the characteristics – editorial stance, circulation figures, the readership, for example – of the particular newspapers used in this study.

Printing presses were introduced into Siam in the mid-1830s by the American missionary Dr. Bradley, who also published the country's first periodical, the short-lived *Bangkok Recorder*, in 1844 and, later, the *Bangkok Calendar*. Another missionary, Dr. Samuel Smith, was responsible for the English-language *Siam Weekly Advertiser* (1869-86) and the Thai-language *Sayam samai* (1882-86). Until the 1880s, publishing remained the preserve of these men and the royal court, which published a range of official and semi-official periodicals and journals such as *Ratchakitchanubeksa* (The Government Gazette) and *Darunowat*.⁴ During the last decades of the nineteenth century, American and European entrepreneurs set up the country's three principal, and long-running, English-language newspapers: the *Bangkok Times* (weekly, 1887-96, daily 1896-1942), the *Bangkok Daily Mail*, and the *Siam Observer*.⁵ The latter two also had Thai-language editions, which seem to have differed slightly from their English-language counterparts, in both tone and content.⁶ By 1910, all three were receiving annual subsidies from the Siamese state and were regularly provided with news of government activities. Amongst the English-speaking inhabitants of the capital, the *Bangkok Times* was apparently the most

⁴ For an overview of these early publications see Craig J. Reynolds, *Seditious Histories: Contesting Thai and Southeast Asian Pasts*, Singapore: University of Washington Press, 2006, pp. 56-9.

⁵ On the ownership and editors of these three newspapers see Wright and Breakspear (eds), *Twentieth Century Impressions*, pp. 293-5; Thompson, *Thailand*, pp. 789-90. The *Bangkok Times* (BT) issued a weekly, overseas edition called the *Bangkok Times Weekly Mail* (BTWM) and most of the references to the paper are drawn from this publication.

⁶ The Thai version of the *Bangkok Daily Mail* (BDM) was called the *Krungthep Daily Mail* (KDM). All citations from these sources will thus indicate which version; citations from the Thai version of the *Siam Observer* (SO) will be marked with a [t].

influential and it claimed to have the largest circulation of any paper in the country. It was conservative in tone, a defender of the British Empire but sympathetic to Siam, and enjoyed a close working relationship with the Siamese government, to which it was not afraid to offer constructive criticism.⁷ Under American editorship for much of its existence, the *Bangkok Daily Mail* was more outspoken and a constant thorn in the government's side. By 1912, it had a circulation of up to 1,500 copies per issue and there are indications this was considerably higher than those of its Thai- and English-language rivals.⁸ After a series of critical commentaries of the king and the court, it was bought by Vajiravudh in 1917. But the *Bangkok Daily Mail* remained controversial, often carrying 'sensational revelations of police corruption',⁹ and in 1927 Prajadhipok sold the paper to his father-in-law, Prince Svasti. It was closed by the constitutional regime in October 1933 because of its royalist connections. Like its contemporaries, the liberal *Siam Observer* had government connections and seems to have occupied a middle-ground between the conservative, elitist *Bangkok Times* and the controversial, populist *Bangkok Daily Mail*. It ceased publication in early 1933 due to financial reasons.¹⁰

Of the numerous Thai-language newspapers that emerged in the early twentieth century, the *Nangsuphim thai* and the *Chino sayam warasap* deserve mention. The latter was founded in 1907 by Chinese revolutionaries and, as the name suggests, there was both a Thai-language edition and a Chinese one, which was considered the more moderate of the capital's three Chinese-language papers.¹¹ From around the start of the Sixth Reign, both the *Nangsuphim thai* and the *Chino sayam warasap* received government subsidies and, following an attempted coup in 1912,

⁷ Batson, *End of the Absolute Monarchy*, pp. 72-3; Vella, *Chaiyo!* p. 255; Thompson, *Thailand*, p. 793.

⁸ Copeland, 'Contested Nationalism', p. 56 n. 16; Vella, *Chaiyo!* p. 254.

⁹ Thompson, *Thailand*, p. 793.

¹⁰ Batson, *End of the Absolute Monarchy*, p. 73.

¹¹ Skinner, *Chinese Society*, p. 156; Copeland, 'Contested Nationalism', p. 36 n. 17.

the former was purchased outright by Vajiravudh. This move was designed to counter the Siamese inclination to 'believe everything they read in the papers' by 'seizing the press as a weapon' for promoting government policies.¹² Vajiravudh was responsible for its editorial policy and frequently used it as an outlet for his writings. It was widely recognised as the voice of the government.¹³ Unsurprisingly, it was shut down following the 1932 coup.

According to Copeland, 1917 marked the advent of 'political journalism' in Siam, with one editor describing his paper as the kingdom's first political newspaper.¹⁴ Driven by the growth of the Bangkok reading public, the early 1920s saw a proliferation of political journals such as the *Yamato* and the *Bangkok kanmuang*. These provided a forum in which the emergent middle class could discuss matters of national importance and air their grievances. It was the age of the popular press. Reflecting the growing antipathy for the absolutist order, these new publications had their sights firmly trained on the Sixth Reign court. As Barmé observes, 'Deference and respect for authority... were, for the most part conspicuously absent from the pages of the popular press' and 'irreverent, contemptuous attitudes towards authority figures in general, including the monarch himself, were commonplace'.¹⁵ The first political daily, the Japanese-registered *Yamato*, was started in 1922. Until it was closed by the Bangkok Police Department in March 1924, its circulation exceeded that of the *Bangkok Daily Mail* and the government-run *Nangsuphim thai*.¹⁶ The *Bangkok kanmuang*, meanwhile, enjoyed a longer existence; started in October 1922, it survived until 1932. Along with the

¹² Copeland, 'Contested Nationalism', p. 36.

¹³ Vella, *Chaiyo!* p. 254.

¹⁴ Copeland, 'Contested Nationalism', p. 52.

¹⁵ Barmé, *Woman, Man, Bangkok*, p. 97.

¹⁶ Copeland, 'Contested Nationalism', p. 54.

Krungthep Daily Mail, it was considered 'the best of the news commentators'.¹⁷ Under the two-year editorship of the noted political satirist and cartoonist Sem Sumanan, the *Bangkok kanmuang* frequently courted controversy, not least for its allegations of police corruption and involvement in illegal gambling. In October 1924, Sem left the paper for the new weekly *Kro lek*, which 'quickly proved to be one of the more provocative publications of the late Sixth Reign.'¹⁸ Another luminary from this period was the 'sensational' though 'ably edited' *Si krung*,¹⁹ which, along with the *Nangsuphim thai*, was the most influential of the Thai-language papers during the Seventh Reign.²⁰ Its owner and editor, Mangkorn Samsen, was an important figure in the governments of the early constitutional period and the paper came to be seen as a semi-official organ of the new regime.²¹ Although many of these publications were short-lived, Batson estimates that there were 10 to 15 Thai-language newspapers in Bangkok at any one time, along with the various English and Chinese ones.²² The most popular had print runs of two to three thousand copies per issue, though Barmé suggests they may actually have been read by up to 7,000 people or more, as the purchaser would invariably pass on their paper to friends, family or workmates.²³ By the 1940s, the total circulation of all papers within the kingdom was estimated at no more than 100,000.²⁴ Copeland has divided these 'voices of the capital' into two broad camps: the government-subsidised or, as termed herein, the mainstream press, which was generally supportive of the government, and the popular

¹⁷ Thompson, *Thailand*, p. 792.

¹⁸ Copeland, 'Contested Nationalism', p. 109.

¹⁹ Thompson, *Thailand*, p. 792.

²⁰ Batson, *End of the Absolute Monarchy*, p. 73.

²¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 243, 266 n. 13.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 72.

²³ Barmé, *Woman, Man, Bangkok*, p. 98.

²⁴ Thompson, *Thailand*, pp. 799-800.

press, which acted as a forum for the government's critics.²⁵ When it came to discussions on gambling, however, this distinction was blurred.

Who read these publications? For much of the period in question, the readership was concentrated almost exclusively in Bangkok. During the Fifth Reign, a conservative estimate of the readership of both the Thai- and English-language press would be that it did not extend much beyond the Siamese elite and a limited number of male commoners who had been fortunate to receive a modern education. Given the modest provision for female education, it can be assumed that women were just a fraction of this readership. Due to the growth of both the bureaucracy and the commercial economy, Barmé suggests that by the 1920s the reading public had broadened to include 'low- and middle-level government officials, salaried workers in the private sector, and literate members of the Thai working class, as well as educated middle-class women.'²⁶ Along with an 'incipient literati' of professional journalists, it was these groups that used the growing popular press of the 1920s to express their dissatisfaction with the absolutist order.²⁷ Even with the expansion of literacy in the constitutional era, the provincial reading public remained small.²⁸ The opinions expressed in the newspapers detailed above cannot, therefore, be said to be representative of the wider population; they were the viewpoints of just a small but highly significant minority.

As already noted, the absolute monarchy had an increasingly fractious relationship with the press. However, the government's ability to regulate and control it was limited by the 'unequal' treaties, which guaranteed the rights of foreign nationals to conduct commercial activities within the kingdom. Additionally, some

²⁵ Copeland, 'Contested Nationalism', p. 58.

²⁶ Barmé, *Woman, Man, Bangkok*, p. 98.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 7-8.

²⁸ Thompson, *Thailand*, p. 799.

local publishers took advantage of extraterritoriality, by registering their publications to foreign frontmen, in order to avoid prosecution.²⁹ Others enjoyed the protection of powerful patrons.³⁰ Subsidies were one strategy the government employed to try and influence editorial policy, though, as the *Bangkok Daily Mail* and *Chino sayam warasap* frequently demonstrated, they were no guarantee of compliance. Moreover, the commercial boom in publishing during the 1920s further undermined their effectiveness.³¹ Tighter regulation was the other option. According to Vella, however, Vajiravudh was an admirer of the free press in England and averse to state censorship.³² Despite the recommendations of his ministers, a press law was not enacted until 1923. In its wake, scores of Bangkok publishers were prosecuted, printing presses confiscated and many papers, including the *Yamato* and both editions of the *Chino sayam warasap*, closed.³³ A more comprehensive and stringent press law was passed in 1927 and further closures ensued.³⁴ One effect was that 'the more libellous type of attacks on members of the elite... largely disappeared, and criticism of authority came to be expressed in broader, less personal terms.'³⁵ Yet, in spite of this creeping tendency towards censorship and control, the last years of absolutist rule were a time of relative press freedom compared with the post-1932 period. Although formal censorship was briefly abolished in July 1932 and the People's Party even expressed gratitude for the press' positive attitude towards its movement, increasing regulation and repression were the order of the day. Insecure and acutely sensitive towards criticism, the new regime closed a number of papers and enacted a new press

²⁹ Copeland, 'Contested Nationalism', pp. 16, 72-3.

³⁰ Barmé, *Woman, Man, Bangkok*, p. 99.

³¹ Copeland, 'Contested Nationalism', pp. 56-7.

³² Vella, *Chaiyo!* p. 253.

³³ Copeland, 'Contested Nationalism', p. 72, 72 n. 17.

³⁴ Thompson, *Thailand*, p. 792; Baker and Pasuk, *Thailand*, p. 118.

³⁵ Barmé, *Woman, Man, Bangkok*, p. 99.

law before the end of 1932. Over the next decade, further measures were initiated to curb public debate.³⁶

To what extent did the press influence government policy in general? During the Fifth Reign, it can be argued that it was negligible for it was essentially just a debating forum for the elite. With the growth of the popular press from the 1910s onwards, however, the media began to wield a degree of influence. Both Vajiravudh and Prajadhipok apparently read all the principal Bangkok papers and were sensitive to writings that criticised their administrations.³⁷ But the two differed in their understanding of press power. Vajiravudh saw it as the creator of public opinion, while Prajadhipok considered it to be a manifestation of general feeling.³⁸ Tellingly, the latter and his ministers often discussed newspaper articles in order to decide which demanded some response or action.³⁹ Both governments collected extensive newspaper clippings on gambling; these not only form the documentary basis of much of this chapter but also provide physical evidence that the press was at least being heard, if not listened to. During the first decade of the constitutional era, the press lost much of its bite due to stricter regulation and censorship; rather than attack the government, it tended to be more supportive. This was perhaps due in part to the new regime instituting a number of reforms, such as the expansion of female education, that had previously been championed by the press. Barmé concludes that 'the critical activism of the 1920s and early 1930s was replaced to a large extent by a growing pragmatism toward and acceptance of the new socio-political order.'⁴⁰

³⁶ Ibid., pp. 231-2; Thompson, *Thailand*, pp. 795-8.

³⁷ Vella, *Chaiyo!* pp. 251-2; Copeland, 'Contested Nationalism', p. 130. In 1931, Prajadhipok's subscription list included the *Nangsuphim thai*, *Si krung*, *Bangkok kanmuang*, the *Bangkok Daily Mail*, the *Siam Observer* and the *Bangkok Times*. Copeland, 'Contested Nationalism', p. 130 n. 7.

³⁸ Copeland, 'Contested Nationalism', p. 129; Batson, *End of the Absolute Monarchy*, p. 16.

³⁹ Copeland, 'Contested Nationalism', p. 130.

⁴⁰ Barmé, *Woman, Man, Bangkok*, p. 232.

Portrayals of Gambling in the Press

Throughout the period covered by this study, the Thai- and English-language press articulated a more or less unanimous and consistent view on gambling that, in terms of both language and opinion, broadly mirrored that of the ruling elite. Gambling was a corrosive vice (*abaiyamuk*); an evil, wicked thing (*pen sing chua-rai*); and a sure path to disaster and ruin (*nam khwamhaiyana*).⁴¹ Sometimes, more evocative terms were used: commentators often described gambling as a malign spirit (*phi kanphanan*) that had possessed the Siamese people, for instance.⁴² Similarly, the press echoed the government's assertions that gambling was a primary cause of poverty and crime: it not only threatened the moral and economic well-being of those people drawn into its web but also endangered the future of the nation.⁴³ Cautionary examples of the harmful effects of gambling were a regular feature within the kingdom's periodicals. Take, for instance, the woman whose fixation with cards resulted in her pawning away all her family's possessions and who was then divorced by her husband;⁴⁴ the young boy found begging for money so he could redeem the loin-cloth he had lost through gambling;⁴⁵ the son of a minor noble who resorted to theft to fund his gambling habit;⁴⁶ the pawnshop clerk who committed fraud in order to play billiards and was subsequently arrested;⁴⁷ and the numerous suicides attributed to gambling debts.⁴⁸ Commenting on the horror stories that surrounded the Winter Fairs of the Sixth Reign, the *Bangkok Times* suggested Siamese reporters

⁴¹ For examples see *NT*, 13 March 1916; *SO* [t], 16 Nov. 1916; *Sayam sakshi*, 7 July 1923; *Bangkok kanmuang*, 19 July 1923; *Lak muang*, 20 Oct. 1928.

⁴² *KDM*, 14 April 1917; *Kro lek*, 7 Feb. 1930.

⁴³ In addition to the newspapers cited in the two footnotes above see *BTWM*, 15 June 1904; *KDM*, 11 & 12 June 1914; *Awanti*, 18 May 1923; *Yamato*, 5 May 1923.

⁴⁴ *Bangkok Calendar*, 1873, pp. 66-7;

⁴⁵ *Siam Repository*, 1869, p. 94.

⁴⁶ *CSW*, 13 March 1917. According to the *Bangkok Times*, this was a common occurrence. *BTWM*, 15 June 1904.

⁴⁷ *NT*, 5 July 1928.

⁴⁸ *Samphan thai*, 19 Jan. 1924; *BTWM*, 21 Jan. 1924.

tended to exaggerate and were getting some of their 'facts' from their imaginations.⁴⁹ It had good grounds to be suspicious. In 1923, a writer for the *Bangkok kanmuang* who used the pseudonym KO (*mat-det*) gave an eye-witness account of his trip to the Ratchaburi fair. Amongst other encounters, he described how he had seen a country lad lurking behind a food-stall, scrabbling in the dirt for some discarded food that had already been half-eaten by a dog. When KO asked the boy if he was mad, he replied that he had gambled away all his cash and was desperately hungry.⁵⁰ However, one reader who had also attended the fair later questioned the veracity of this account by pointing out various discrepancies that suggested the reporter had not actually been there.⁵¹ This incident suggests that Siamese commentators felt justified in employing a little artistic license to reinforce the damaging effects of gambling. It also raises questions, to be addressed in the Conclusion, about the exact nature and extent of the perceived gambling problem and implies that certain people might have exaggerated so as to advance their interests.

At the same time, and also like the Siamese elite, the mainstream newspapers – the three English-language papers, especially – recognised that gambling was an intrinsic part of human nature and were thus realistic about the extent to which it could be limited and controlled.⁵² Stemming from this, commentators often gave suggestions as to how gambling might best be exploited for the greater good of the country. In 1914, for instance, one proposed that a system of government bonds might be instituted in place of the *huai* lottery; he believed such an initiative would be both less harmful and more beneficial than the *huai*. Moreover, it was guaranteed to

⁴⁹ *BTWM*, 21 Jan. 1924.

⁵⁰ *Bangkok kanmuang*, 28 Aug. 1923.

⁵¹ NA R.6 N.20.17/27, 'Letter from *khon* Pet in reply to KO, 31 Aug. 1923'.

⁵² Perhaps the best expression of this was the *Siam Observer*'s editorial on the abolition of the gambling houses. *SO*, 31 March 1917. See also *BDM*, 14 Feb. 1916; *Bangkok kanmuang*, 25 July 1923; *BTWM*, 27 July 1923.

succeed because the love of a gamble was so deeply ingrained in the Siamese psyche.⁵³ Similarly, in 1928, another commentator made a strong case for an annual national lottery, referring to the fact that in civilised countries (*araya-prathet*), lotteries were not considered a straightforward form of gambling since they were not as harmful. In his opinion, the benefits of a national lottery far outweighed the disadvantages, with the profits being invested in areas of national importance such as education.⁵⁴ Another manifestation of this pragmatic approach was the recognition of gambling as a form of entertainment and therefore that if it was to be restricted some other amusements, such as sports, had to be encouraged: 'Prohibit gambling by all means, but something should be found to take its place.'⁵⁵

Attitudes towards the Gambling Tax Farms

As might be expected, the missionary press of the mid- to late nineteenth century was highly critical of the Siamese state's reliance upon the gambling tax farms. An article in Bradley's *Bangkok Calendar*, for instance, noted that the revenue from the *huai* lottery 'although great has not the weight of a feather in the scale of good, when compared with the evils which the collecting of it from the people produces. It is as it were [sic] blood drawn from vitals of the body politic, and weakness, and disease, and ulceration, and mortification given in exchange for it.'⁵⁶ The publications of Dr. Smith adopted a similar stance: 'Besides slavery and Government service nothing degenerates so much the "family life" of the Siamese as "gambling" and [nothing] is a worse and more short sighted policy in regard to finances than the present system of

⁵³ *KDM*, 11 June 1914.

⁵⁴ *Si krung*, 25 Oct. 1928.

⁵⁵ *BTWM*, 17 Oct. 1913.

⁵⁶ *Bangkok Calendar*, 1873, p. 64.

gambling houses.’⁵⁷ This writer then argued that any loss in revenue resulting from the closure of the dens would quickly be made good because ‘The people, instead of squandering away their money and especially their time, would certainly seek and find employment for both... they would produce more and this increased production would yield revenues.’⁵⁸ Such criticisms did not come only from moralising Westerners with colonial or proselytising ambitions, however. Siamese commoners used Smith’s *Sayam samai* journal to air their grievances in the belief that it would be read by the king.⁵⁹ In 1886, it carried a letter on ‘The Evils of Gambling In All Its Varieties’. There is no clear indication of the writer’s identity but it can be surmised that he was a well-educated Siamese because the letter was later reproduced in the *Siam Weekly Advertiser* to ‘show our European readers that *Siamese know how to write*.’⁶⁰ He started by noting his pleasure upon learning that Chulalongkorn had announced his intentions to close the gambling houses in the mid-1870s before lamenting the fact that this had yet to be carried out. Rather, the Fifth Reign had seen a great increase in gambling. His was a personal tragedy, for his three sons had been ruined by the gambling houses, reduced to stealing and pawning goods to feed their addiction. Their debasement was indicative of a wider malaise afflicting Siamese society and the writer harked back to the reign of Rama III, when ‘There were fewer public offenders than at present.... There were few gambling houses, and as a consequence few thieves.’ He concluded by highlighting the extravagant lifestyles of the Chinese gambling tax farmers and their tendency to remit large sums of money

⁵⁷ *Siam Weekly Advertiser*, 27 Feb. 1886.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

⁵⁹ Kullada, *Rise and Decline*, p. 109.

⁶⁰ *Siam Weekly Advertiser*, 27 Feb. 1886. Italics in the original.

back to China: 'The Chinaman brought no money into the country. All which he spends comes from the people who gamble.'⁶¹

Similar opinions were voiced by the commoner intellectual Thianwan (T. W. S. Wannapho). This social campaigner and outspoken critic of the absolutist order was a key figure in the development of the Thai-language press.⁶² Following a lengthy spell of imprisonment in the late nineteenth century, Thianwan started a journal, *Tulawiphak photchanakit*, in the 1900s in which to express his reformist ideas. These included universal education, a more representative system of government, equality for women, the abolition of slavery and polygamy, and a prohibition on gambling.⁶³ Thianwan's criticisms of the state's patronage of gambling show a well-rounded understanding of the issues. Recognising the government's revenue needs, he lamented the fact that 'true Thais' and 'nationalists' (*phuak rakchat*) did not have the opportunity to bid successfully for all the Bangkok gambling farms. If they did, they could then close all the dens but still pay the government, thereby freeing the people from ruin. He also highlighted how the money the government received from the gambling farms was equal to that spent by the tax farmers in, first, acquiring their monopoly through bribes and then running their operations, all of which came from the blood and sweat of the common man. The social costs were far greater than any advantages the government gained; the state was effectively crippling itself. Here Thianwan employed the metaphor of disease. But rather than infecting the people, gambling had infected the government itself. Combating the symptoms of gambling, namely crime, sapped the strength of

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² For an overview of Thianwan's life see Walter F. Vella, 'Thianwan of Siam: A Man Who Fought Giants' in Ronald D. Renard (ed.), *Anuson Walter Vella*, Chiang Mai: W. F. Vella Fund, Payap University; & Honolulu: Center for Asian and Pacific Studies, University of Hawaii at Manoa, 1986, pp. 79-81.

⁶³ Ibid., pp. 81-9; Barné, *Woman, Man, Bangkok*, pp. 23-6.

the state, because the cost of building up the police force was more than the revenue from the gambling farms. Worse, however much the government spent, it could never be enough, for if the disease remained untreated, it would not go away by itself.⁶⁴ In other words, dealing with the effects of gambling was pointless so long as the government continued to endorse it. Through the use of such vibrant imagery, Thianwan was able to convey to his readership the true cost of the gambling tax farms. However, as the letter from the *Siam Weekly Advertiser* discussed above illustrates, there was nothing new about Thianwan's accounts of the social and economic damage resulting from the state patronage of gambling. Rather, as Barmé argues, his significance lies less in 'the perceived originality of his thought' than in his ability 'to bring such ideas to the attention of a broader public'.⁶⁵ Moreover, during the period when his journal was published the government was already proceeding full pace with the closure of the provincial gambling houses. Nevertheless, such articles generated a wider public awareness of how the government's short-sighted policies were counterproductive and responsible for many of Siamese society's ills.

On the whole, though, the mainstream press and its readership were sympathetic to the problem of how to abolish the gambling tax farms without throwing the kingdom's finances into turmoil.⁶⁶ Furthermore, it was understood that terminating all the farms at once would be counterproductive because gambling was so deeply ingrained in the Siamese psyche that closure would invariably lead to a sharp upswing in illegal gambling.⁶⁷ When the *huai* lottery and the gambling tax farms were abolished, the mainstream press was united in approval. The *Bangkok*

⁶⁴ This account of Thianwan's views on gambling is drawn from one of his articles reproduced in Sangop Suriyin, *Thianwan*, 3rd edition, Bangkok: Ruamsan Press, 2000, pp. 118-23.

⁶⁵ Barmé, *Woman, Man, Bangkok*, p. 23.

⁶⁶ See for instance *CSW*, 8 & 16 Dec. 1914; *NT*, 13 March 1916; *SO* [t], 16 Nov. 1916.

⁶⁷ See for example *SO* [t], 19 June 1915; *KDM*, 3 Feb. 1917.

Times, for instance, likened the end of the *huai* to the abolition of the state monopoly on the sale of spirits in Russia.⁶⁸ The Thai-language press, meanwhile, lavished extravagant praise upon Vajiravudh and his administration.⁶⁹ The Thai-language edition of the *Siam Observer* even employed the discourse of *siwilai* to claim that the king had truly lifted Siam to a higher level of civilisation.⁷⁰ As the following section will show, however, this was the high point of press approval for the Sixth Reign government's approach to gambling.

Gambling and Critiques of the Sixth Reign Government

As already noted, the late 1910s and early 1920s saw a proliferation of news journals that acted as a forum in which critics of the absolutist regime and social order could voice their grievances. Two aspects of the gambling issue were particularly provocative: first, the involvement or complicity of the nobility and all levels of government officials, including the police force, in both legal and illegal gambling activities; and, second, the Sixth Reign court's continued reliance on gambling as a revenue provider, despite having publicly renounced it with the abolition of the gambling tax farms. Vajiravudh's regime thereby made itself vulnerable to accusations that it was directly responsible for the persistent gambling problem and the consequent socio-economic damage. Crucially, these criticisms were not confined to the emergent popular press but also sometimes appeared in government-subsidised, mainstream newspapers. In short, the press was able to exploit the gambling issue to portray the absolute monarchy as inimical to the welfare of the nation.

⁶⁸ *BTWM*, 15 March 1916.

⁶⁹ In addition to a glowing editorial, the *Nangsuphim thai* published various letters expressing gratitude for the king's grace and mercy. See *NT*, 13, 24 & 25 Nov. 1916 and also *KDM*, 16 Nov. 1916.

⁷⁰ *SO* [t], 16 Nov. 1916.

Judging from the reports and editorials in some sections of the press, government officials and members of the upper-class were among the most inveterate gamblers and, by setting a poor example to the rest of the population, were culpable for the extent of the gambling problem.⁷¹ Writing in the *Siam Observer*, the commentator Prarop (literally, 'Thinking Out Loud') questioned the effectiveness of preaching about the evils of gambling while government officials continued to gamble illegally. The priority was getting them to renounce gambling; only then might others follow suit.⁷² The basis for such criticism was the assumption that the behaviour of officials and nobles should reflect their lofty position within Siamese society; in other words, that they should be above 'vices' such as gambling. Failure to adhere to these standards led commoners to believe that if the upper classes could not resist the urge to gamble, then why should they?⁷³ Following this line of reasoning, even the participation of officials and nobles in legal gambling became a source of criticism. Commenting on the widespread card-playing in the homes of officials during the Siamese New Year in 1917, the *Krungthep Daily Mail* observed how invitations to parties were shamelessly explicit about the gambling that would take place. It then attacked the excuse that gambling was a means of relaxation by sarcastically noting that playing cards might indeed relieve a mind worn out by waiting all day to sign one's name to receive a salary. After glumly noting that most officials' morals were no different from those of the general population, it concluded that gambling by officials was more serious because they received a salary, derived from the labour of the people, which they then gambled away.⁷⁴ This critique was extended to high-class women and the wives of officials, whose gambling habits were

⁷¹ See for instance *KDM*, 26 Nov. 1916. These sentiments were also vividly expressed in satirical cartoons, some of which are discussed in Barmé, *Woman, Man, Bangkok*, pp. 111-13, 120-1.

⁷² *SO* [t], 19 June 1915.

⁷³ *SO* [t], 17 Jan. 1917.

⁷⁴ *KDM*, 14 April 1917.

a particular *bête noire* of the press. What seems to have most infuriated commentators was that these women led lives of relative luxury and, unencumbered by the need to go to work, squandered their free time taking part in illicit card circles rather than engaging in more useful activities.⁷⁵ In addition to these moralistic concerns, the press feared that the gambling habits of government officials, or their wives, might lead them into embezzlement and corruption.⁷⁶ These criticisms of the gambling habits of the nobility and government officials formed part of a broader critique upon the misbehaviour – the drinking, womanising, idleness, and general hedonism – of these social groups, the underlying aim of which seems to have been to shame them into conforming to a certain standard of propriety.

Another area that provided the press with ammunition for attacks upon the absolutist social order was a perceived double standard in law enforcement. As noted in Chapter 4, members of the Siamese elite enjoyed virtual immunity from arrest or prosecution because of their social status and privileges. The *Sara rat* summed up this situation by noting that, despite all the arrests for illegal gambling made by the police, it was only the small fry that seemed to get caught while the big fish got away.⁷⁷ Given this, it is hardly surprising that the popular press had a field day in 1923 when two high-ranking nobles were implicated heads of a large underground gambling ring – the case of the two Phrayas discussed in Chapter 4. Recognising the significance of such high-profile arrests, the *Yamato* observed that it was a warning to all members of the nobility that their status would no longer protect them.⁷⁸ According to the *Awanti*, however, public opinion held that the two suspects would escape punishment; ‘Could

⁷⁵ *KDM*, 23 Jan. 1917; *BTWM*, 12 July 1924. The latter paper carried a translation of an article from a Thai-language journal. See also Barmé, *Woman, Man, Bangkok*, pp. 127-9.

⁷⁶ See for instance *SO* [t], 17 Jan. 1917; *KDM*, 23 Jan. 1917; *CSW*, 10 Feb. 1917.

⁷⁷ *Sara rat*, 2 May 1923. For similar sentiments see *CSW*, 27 Jan. 1917 & 15 Feb. 1923; *SO* [t], 22 Dec. 1922.

⁷⁸ *Yamato*, 5 May 1923.

it be that the country's laws do not apply to people of rank?' it asked rhetorically.⁷⁹ Nevertheless, both papers were convinced the two nobles were guilty and, on account of the disregard they had shown for the country's laws and the king's will, called for them to be punished severely in order to set an example to others in similar positions.⁸⁰ Indeed, the *Awanti* wrote an open letter to the editors of five other newspapers, proposing they collectively petitioned the king to dismiss the two nobles from government service and strip them of rank.⁸¹

The press also commonly made thinly veiled allusions to police complicity in illicit gambling. Puzzled as to why illegal gambling had increased since 1917, the *Sara rat*, for instance, wondered how the gambling house tax farmers had managed to catch many more offenders before abolition than the police were able to in the early 1920s, despite the fact that the latter had ten times more men at its disposal.⁸² Similarly, the *Awanti* concluded its praise for Police Commissioner Phraya Athikon's role in arresting the two nobles mentioned above by mischievously asking him if he had come across any other large illicit dens recently.⁸³ Lastly, the *Chino sayam warasap* ran an article detailing how villagers in a district on the outskirts of Bangkok, where underground gambling was rife, were protected from arrest by a 'heavenly being' (*thewada*). Whenever a household wished to gamble, a flag was raised. The 'heavenly being', presumably a corrupt official, would then fly to that house to collect an offering – of money rather than 'heavenly sustenance' (*thip-yahan*) – and in return would warn of any approaching police officers, thereby giving the illegal gamblers time to hide evidence of their crime.⁸⁴

⁷⁹ *Awanti*, 11 May 1923.

⁸⁰ *Yamato*, 17 May 1923.

⁸¹ *Awanti*, 9 May 1923.

⁸² *Sara rat*, 2 May 1923.

⁸³ *Awanti*, 9 May 1923.

⁸⁴ *CSW*, 16 Dec. 1916.

Perhaps one of the most controversial articles of its time, an outstanding example of satirical writing, and a brilliant synthesis of all the criticisms outlined above, was a piece by Sem Sumanan that appeared in the *Bangkok kanmuang* on 12 March 1923. It has already been discussed by Copeland, though not in its entirety, and, given its significance, merits further examination.⁸⁵ Sem started by commenting on the prevalence of 'unusually fat' police officers in the capital's Chinese districts since the closure of the gambling houses. This was unusual because:

the police stationed in these districts ought to be getting plenty of exercise catching gamblers. Moreover, one would expect them to be irritated by the extra work but instead they are surprisingly happy – as happy as if they'd won the 100,000 baht jackpot in the lottery. Not only are they delighted by the opportunity to get exercise catching gamblers, but it would appear that it is precisely this type of exercise which is helping them to look so hearty. Without the Chinese... our policemen might waste away.⁸⁶

As Copeland highlights, this 'exercise' was a metaphor for bribes.⁸⁷ The article then went on to discuss the 'people with eighteen or nineteen crowns' (*phuak sip-paet sip-kao mongkut*) who also made a living from illegal gambling. The phrase 'eighteen crowns' refers to the eighteen monkey warriors that served Rama in the Indian epic *Ramayana*.⁸⁸ In popular parlance, however, it is used to refer to people of a duplicitous – or perhaps, more literally, multiplicitous – nature and in present day Thailand might be applied to such characters as door-to-door salesmen or used-car dealers.⁸⁹ 'Nineteen crowns', meanwhile, was a phrase coined by Sem to refer to high-ranking government officials who, on account of their status, deserved an extra crown. Of course, the implication was that they were even more duplicitous and untrustworthy than those commoners involved in illegal gambling. By night they did not remain at home but drove helter-skelter through the streets to frequent various

⁸⁵ See Copeland, 'Contested Nationalism', pp. 86-7.

⁸⁶ Quoted in *ibid.*, p. 86.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸⁸ McFarland, *Thai-English Dictionary*, p. 867.

⁸⁹ My thanks to Chatnopol Aksornsawad for explaining this usage.

dens in which they won and lost huge sums of money. When these officials then ran up gambling debts that their salaries could not cover, they frantically tried to find more cash. Sem concluded by calling them bandits and thieves who stole from the people, whether it be private money that they won from others or the state's money when they blew their salaries.⁹⁰ As might be expected, this article caused quite a stir and Phraya Athikon brought a libel suit against the *Bangkok kanmuang*, in what became known as 'the Case of the Fat Policeman'. This eventually led to Sem being imprisoned in August 1923.⁹¹

This did not deter Sem, however, and while inside he continued his campaign to expose police complicity in illegal gambling. On 15 September 1923, the *Bangkok kanmuang* carried one of his cartoons depicting a demon that personified gambling ushering people into hell (see Figure 5.1). Copeland observes that the caption – which reads: 'Is m'lord just going to sit there while demon gambling pulls fellow human beings down to hell?' – was a direct address to the Police Commissioner.⁹² A year later, Sem reiterated his allegations in another cartoon, this time portraying Phraya Athikon as a dog tracking down illegal gamblers (see Figure 5.2). As Copeland notes, the word 'gambling' on the side of the dog implies that 'the hunt need go no further than the Police Commissioner himself.'⁹³

⁹⁰ This article is reproduced in the archival file NA R.6 N.4.1/214, 'Extract from *Bangkok kanmuang*, 12 March 1923'.

⁹¹ Copeland, 'Contested Nationalism', p. 87.

⁹² Ibid.

⁹³ Ibid., p. 111.



Figure 5.1: Cartoon from *Bangkok kanmuang*, 15 September 1923 (Source: Copeland, 'Contested Nationalism', p. 107)

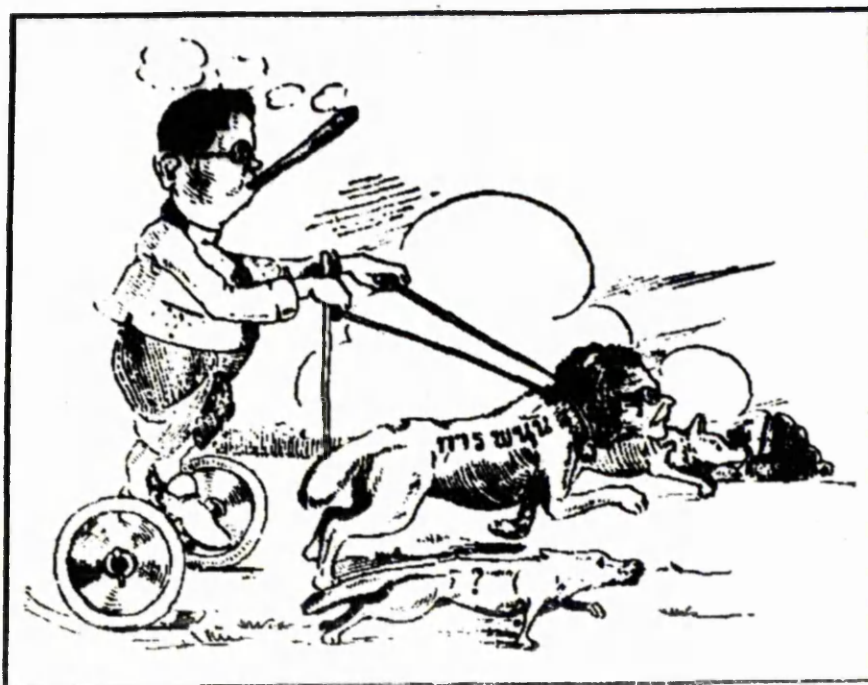


Figure 5.2: Cartoon from *Kro lek*, 30 November 1924 (Source: Copeland, 'Contested Nationalism', p. 114)

Perhaps more damaging to the Sixth Reign government were the criticisms surrounding its use of gambling as a fundraising device, specifically through fetes such as the Winter Fair and that in Ratchaburi where gaming stalls were a prime attraction. As already noted in Chapter 3, the press carried stories describing the harmful effects of these opportunities to indulge in gambling, with reports of families driven into poverty and people driven to suicide. Although the government mouthpiece the *Nangsuphim thai* was quick to blame the people for foolishly bringing ruin upon themselves, other sections of the press held the organisers of these events directly accountable for the social damage.⁹⁴ Additionally, many papers reasoned that the provision of public facilities for gambling at these fairs induced people to gamble, legally and illegally, at other times, while also encouraging other local authorities to set up similar fundraising events.⁹⁵

Besides the ascribed social damage and blatant inducement to gamble, the press had a number of other objections to these fairs. First, while most newspapers recognised that the money went to worthwhile causes such as the Wild Tigers and the development of the air force, many objected to the way in which charity was used as a pretext for gambling, especially since the harmful effects far outweighed the benefits. As a headline in the *Bangkok kanmuang* put it: 'Gambling in aid of the nation is killing the elephant to acquire its tusks.'⁹⁶ The main culprits were the Wild Tigers, which was the main beneficiary of the Winter Fair, and Phraya Nonthisen, Chief of Staff of the corps and organiser of that event.⁹⁷ One newspaper compared the fundraising methods of the Wild Tigers with those employed by other organisations, such as the Siamese Red Cross, which relied on parades, exhibitions, and handicraft

⁹⁴ *NT*, 22 Nov. 1924; *CSW*, 14 Feb. 1923.

⁹⁵ See for instance *Yamato*, 26 July 1923; *Samphan thai*, 8 Dec. 1923; *Sayam rat*, 28 Nov. 1924.

⁹⁶ *Bangkok kanmuang*, 8 Feb. 1924. See also *CSW*, 14 Feb. 1923.

⁹⁷ See for example *Sayam rat*, 10 Sept. 1923.

fairs in order to solicit donations from the public. Given these alternatives, it argued, the Wild Tigers had no excuse for promoting gambling to meet its financial requirements.⁹⁸ It is in this context that another cartoon by Sem Sumanan, published in the 11 January 1925 edition of *Kro lek*, should be viewed (see Figure 5.3). The cartoon's setting is most likely the clubhouse of the Royal Division of the Wild Tigers.⁹⁹ In the upper left corner a figure that Copeland identifies as Vajiravudh is 'happily quaffing a beer' while locked in conversation with another person, perhaps Phraya Nonthisen himself.¹⁰⁰ Members of the Wild Tigers watch as two skeletons play a game of billiards. The caption reads: 'A competition between national development and the Wild Tigers'. Although a little ambiguous, Sem seems to be implying that Vajiravudh and his court were enjoying the profits from the Wild Tigers' gambling enterprises at the expense of emaciated gamblers, represented by the skeletons. In other words, the development of the Wild Tigers was more important to the king than the welfare of the Siamese people and the nation.

⁹⁸ NA R.6 N.20.17/29, 'The fundraising methods of the Wild Tigers compared with those of other organisations.' There is no indication as to which paper this article was taken from. The Siamese Red Cross was often lauded for its refusal to be associated with any gambling activities or to endorse it as a source of income. See *Yamato*, 26 July 1923; *Bangkok kanmuang*, 8 Feb. 1924. However, as shown in Chapter 3, even it succumbed to the easy money offered by lotteries during the economic crisis of the early 1930s.

⁹⁹ Greene details how the Royal Division received the most generous grants from the Privy Purse and was equipped with billiard tables imported from England. Greene, *Absolute Dreams*, p. 83.

¹⁰⁰ Copeland, 'Contested Nationalism', p. 112.



Figure 5.3: Cartoon from *Kro lek*, 11 January 1925 (Source: Copeland, 'Contested Nationalism', p. 117)

Phraya Khathathonbodi, the Lord Lieutenant of monthon Ratchaburi, was similarly vilified for organising fundraising fetes where the monopoly rights for gambling stalls were put up for auction.¹⁰¹ Some papers wondered why he had to rely on gambling revenue to build an airstrip when other monthons had managed to find other means.¹⁰² The *Sayam rat* even went so far as to question his fitness for office.¹⁰³ In their campaign against gambling, some elements of the press thereby identified certain figures within the Siamese elite as the main villains; the implication being that if they were removed from office, gambling would diminish.

The press was also concerned as to the destination of the money raised from these events. For instance, when the committee responsible for the annual motor-

¹⁰¹ *Bangkok kanmuang*, 19 July 1923; *Sayam rat*, 10 Sept. 1923.

¹⁰² *Yamato*, 26 July 1923; *Bangkok kanmuang*, 28 Aug. 1923.

¹⁰³ *Sayam rat*, 28 Nov. 1924. See also *BTWM*, 29 Nov. 1924.

racing meetings and air-displays published its 1922/3 report on the donations it had made, the *Yamato* pointed out that the police force had received some money, despite the fact that the entrance-cum-lottery tickets for the event had not listed it as a recipient. Meanwhile, out of all the kingdom's hospitals, which were one of the indicated beneficiaries, only the Central Hospital had received any money. The paper observed bitterly that this was fair because the word 'hospital' (*rong phayaban*) on the ticket had no letter 'S' at the end and it was thus presumptuous to assume that it meant many hospitals.¹⁰⁴ Of course, the tickets were in the Thai language, which has no plural form for nouns, and the *Yamato* was being ironic in using an English language grammatical construction to explain why hospitals had not received their due. The implication was that the committee had distributed the funds dishonestly. Similarly, the *Chino sayam warasap* was alarmed at the way in which government officials sought to profit personally from the Winter Fairs by investing in running some of the gambling stalls. Noting how some shamelessly paraded their involvement, the paper commented that the only charity these officials were interested in was themselves. It then observed caustically that they believed they were entitled to make money in this manner, as it was entirely appropriate for their status.¹⁰⁵

Another major objection was that the games at the fairs tended to be straightforward gambling games, such as *hi-lo* and *si ngao lak* which were played for cash, rather than more traditional fairground games, such as target shooting and fishing for prizes. The legality of gambling for cash at these events was highly ambiguous: for some papers it was merely bending the law, for others it was breaking it outright. The *Bangkok kanmuang* took a particularly hard line on this. Before the

¹⁰⁴ *Yamato*, 1 Aug. 1923.

¹⁰⁵ *CSW*, 15 Feb. 1923.

1923 Winter Fair it apparently asked Phraya Nonthisen not to allow playing for money. Its plea fell on deaf ears, however, for after the event the *Wayamo* newspaper playfully noted that 'Chao Khun Nonthisen doesn't care who says what and because of this we could gamble for money and have fun.' The *Wayamo* then teased the *Bangkok kanmuang* by inquiring what it might do now that its threats had had no effect, and praised the organiser of the Winter Fair for being steadfast.¹⁰⁶ Nevertheless, the paper's flippant tone makes it clear who was the real villain. The *Bangkok kanmuang* also used satire to make a point, and one reporter's description of his visit to the 1924 Winter Fair is a fine example. Stopping at one stall, he takes great pleasure in watching some high-society ladies who, it is implied, were gambling there. But this did not last long:

My delight turned to horror when I saw Chao Khun Nonthisen, the organiser of the Winter Fair, along with a few other officials and a beautiful lady come to sit at the stall. 'Hey! Why have you come? Ah, I see! Oh, yes! You've come to stop them gambling for money, for sure.' Immediately my shock turned to delight once more for I had actually seen a government official of Siam doing his duty! 'Hurrah for Chao Khun Nonthisen.' But just as soon as I opened my mouth to thank Khun Nonthisen for coming to stop the gambling, he took a 20 baht note from his pocket and placed a 5 baht stake on *hi-lo*. He won as well. As the stallholder gave him his winnings, I was amazed. 'Chao Khun Nonthisen, organiser of the fair; Chao Khun Nonthisen, favourite of His Majesty; Chao Khun Nonthisen, you who know only too well that gambling for money does not conform with the wishes of the King. But alas! Instead of stopping this as you should have done, you do the opposite and start playing *hi-lo*. It's appropriate for a noble like yourself and in accordance with the wishes of His Majesty, right?' Tired of seeing Phraya Nonthisen's face, I decided it was better to go home. Just as I turned to leave, I heard Chao Khun say: "This is good fun, playing like the truly civilised (*yang ni sanuk di len yang siwilai tae*). Hey! I've won 10 baht!" The stallholder gave him 10 baht. 'Fine. It's fun just like you say. But the people will be ruined on account of this fun.'¹⁰⁷

Through his feigned surprise and mock delight, the writer launches a withering assault on Phraya Nonthisen that leaves no doubt in the reader's mind as to who was

¹⁰⁶ *Wayamo*, 21 Feb. 1923.

¹⁰⁷ *Bangkok kanmuang*, 10 Jan. 1924.

to blame for the country's gambling problem. By describing Phraya Nonthisen's excitement in winning such a petty sum, the writer also suggests his greed and preoccupation with money. Lastly, the writer subverts the discourse of *siwilai* to show that the civilised state to which Phraya Nonthisen and, by extension, the Sixth Reign court aspired was immoral, materialistic and would ultimately destroy the country.

In sum, for the press, the extent of the gambling problem during the early 1920s represented all that was wrong with the absolutist social order: the corruption, hypocrisy, inequality, injustice and moral turpitude related to gambling was a manifestation of a wider social malaise afflicting Siamese society. Moreover, through critiques such as those outlined above, the press laid the blame for the gambling problem on the court, identifying certain government figures as the principal promoters and casting them as enemies of the nation. That these attacks had some influence on government policy can be deduced from the fact that, following Vajiravudh's death, the Winter Fairs were discontinued and the Seventh Reign government abandoned the use of gambling as a fundraiser. Additionally, as detailed in Chapter 4, Prajadhipok took a more serious view of government officials taking part in any form of gambling, instituting a number of regulations for disciplining those that did. However, there were also instances when the press exerted a much more direct influence.

The Power of the Press

On at least two occasions, pressure from Siamese newspapers compelled the government into taking action against popular forms of gambling. The first was in regards to the prohibition of the one-baht sweepstakes at Bangkok's two horse-racing

clubs. As mentioned in Chapter 3, the press and some members of the reading public condemned these sweeps for nurturing people's gambling obsession, impoverishing the lower classes and accentuating social problems.¹⁰⁸ One paper highlighted how monks placing bets on the races was damaging to the Buddhist religion and might be criticised by foreigners.¹⁰⁹ Even the *Nangsuphim thai* objected to the sweeps on the grounds that the practice of closing government offices and banks early on race days was bad for business.¹¹⁰ Some papers questioned the legality of betting on the horses, the *Siam Observer* reasoning that the main reason it was tolerated in Siam was because it was done in Britain and France.¹¹¹ The *Bangkok Times* took a different stance, justifying the prohibition of the sweeps on the grounds that their existence had contravened the spirit of government policy: 'The principle the State... adopted [following the abolition of the gambling tax farms] was simply that of no public facilities for gambling, and that is all that is being applied now.... Both the race clubs of Bangkok have gone beyond that, and have provided public facilities for gambling.'¹¹² The *Sayam sakshi* staged an especially vigorous campaign against the sweeps, vehemently insisting that they were in direct contravention of the law. It based this assessment on the argument that, apart from the ministerial regulations that listed specific games and activities, any form of betting that did not depend on either skill or knowledge could be considered gambling.¹¹³ The paper then implied that the reason the relevant officials, Chao Phraya Yomarat in particular, had failed to take action against the sweeps was because other nobles and high-ranking officials had interests in the two race clubs. Here it repeated the claim that the country's laws had

¹⁰⁸ *BTWM*, 9 May 1922 & 19 July 1923; *CSW*, 25 June 1923.

¹⁰⁹ *Sayam sakshi*, 9 July 1923.

¹¹⁰ *NT*, 18 April 1923.

¹¹¹ *SO* [t], 22 Dec. 1922.

¹¹² *BTWM*, 19 July 1923.

¹¹³ *Sayam sakshi*, 9 July 1923.

to be respected by all classes, nobles and commoners alike.¹¹⁴ Later, the paper attempted to force the government's hand by expressing its confidence that Chao Phraya Yomarat was not afraid of the important individuals with shares in the clubs and that the Police Commissioner, Phraya Athikon, was just waiting for his orders.¹¹⁵

Following the prohibition of the sweeps in July 1923, the Thai-language press seems to have been almost unanimous in its approval of the move, as was the general public.¹¹⁶ Noting that the governments of neighbouring countries such as Singapore had already forbidden them, the *Chino sayam warasap* thought it entirely appropriate that the Siamese administration should follow suit.¹¹⁷ The *Sayam sakkhi*, meanwhile, attributed the prohibition to the success of its own editorials and issued the following warning:

Since the words in our paper have resulted in officials cutting off a means of sucking the flesh and blood of the people (*tat hon-thang sup luat-nua ratsadon-ponlamuang*), groups that have a vested interest in issuing the sweeps have been furious with us. But we aren't afraid of these wicked people, and let any that still try to suck the flesh and blood of the people know that we'll continue to call for officials to take action just as in this case.¹¹⁸

Later, the paper offered a more humble assessment of the press campaign against the sweeps, noting that regardless of whether it had been decisive or not, the sweeps had been prohibited.¹¹⁹ But the crucial point is that the Thai-language press believed that, with sustained pressure, it could sway the government on certain matters and be a force for change.

It is also possible to discern press influence in the clampdown on the two billiard variants, *ru* and *lum*, during the late 1920s. The *Krungthep Daily Mail* was apparently the first paper to raise concerns about the growing popularity of billiard *ru*

¹¹⁴ *Sayam sakkhi*, 7 July 1923.

¹¹⁵ *Sayam sakkhi*, 9 July 1923.

¹¹⁶ *CSW*, 21 July 1923; *KDM*, 25 July 1923.

¹¹⁷ *CSW*, 18 July 1923.

¹¹⁸ *Sayam sakkhi*, 18 July 1923.

¹¹⁹ *Sayam sakkhi*, 10 Aug. 1923.

among the labourers and children of Bangkok in May 1928, and others quickly joined in the chorus of disapproval.¹²⁰ As noted in Chapter 3, newspapers soon began to carry reports of burglaries, violent quarrels, and suicides that were attributable to this game. Besides encouraging crime, there were numerous other objections to billiard *ru*. First, it required little skill and tended to be played solely for betting purposes, thereby inculcating a love and knowledge of gambling.¹²¹ An opinion piece in *Si krung*, meanwhile, worried how the widespread playing of billiard *ru* along all the capital's streets might tarnish the country's image in the eyes of foreigners, leading them to wonder why Siamese men were allowed to gamble all day without doing any work. Similarly, police officers playing the game in public, some right in front of the *porisapha* court, did little to help matters.¹²² Perhaps the biggest concern though, was the game's popularity among Siam's youth. Boys between the ages of 12 and 18 regularly visited Bangkok's numerous billiard halls after school or sometimes even played truant. There they would remain long into the night or until they had lost all their cash. As an illustration of the damage caused by the game, the *Krungthep Daily Mail* offered the unhappy, tabloid-esque tale of a hotel owner whose son frequently skipped school to play billiard *ru*. Driven into depression and unable to eat or sleep, the man had locked his errant son in his bedroom. But the boy broke down the wall and fled to a billiard hall. His father finally found him at dawn the next day and punished him. The son escaped once more, though, and had yet to return home. The paper concluded by urging the government to stop the nation's children being corrupted by the game.¹²³

¹²⁰ *KDM*, 25 May 1928; *NT*, 13 June 1928; *Si krung*, 15 June 1928.

¹²¹ *Si krung*, 13 Aug. 1928; *Bangkok kanmuang*, 25 Aug. 1928.

¹²² *Si krung*, 18 Aug. 1928.

¹²³ *KDM*, 27 Sept. 1928. See also *KDM*, 30 June 1928.

Initially, the press was pessimistic as to whether billiard *ru* would be banned. This was because regular billiards was not covered by existing legislation and was very popular among Westerners and government officials, the *Krungthep Daily Mail* implying that its status as a gentleman's game made it immune from prohibition.¹²⁴ The argument then ran that the government could not prohibit billiard *ru* and leave the regular game untouched without seeming unjust.¹²⁵ Once the press learnt that the government was considering issuing a new gambling law, however, it was widely expected that billiard *ru*, if not regular billiards too, would be included in the new legislation.¹²⁶ It could not come soon enough for the *Krungthep Daily Mail*. Noting that it would be at least another six months before the law was ready, the paper asserted that gambling on billiard *ru* would increase as people seized the opportunity to profit from it while it was still legal, and it begged the government to take more immediate action.¹²⁷ When owners of billiard halls converted their tables into ones for playing billiard *lum*, the *Bangkok kanmuang* took up this call. It argued that billiard *lum* was illegal because its scoring system was similar to that of an already forbidden game, and even sent a reporter to question Phraya Athikon as to why the police had yet to suppress it.¹²⁸ Soon after this visit, the police clamped down on the game before prohibiting it outright. Once again, the press forced the government's hand, in this case prompting it to take immediate action rather than wait for the appropriate legislation to be completed.

Although the constitutional regime succeeded in muzzling the more critical elements of the press, newspaper opinion still exercised some influence over

¹²⁴ *KDM*, 25 May 1928.

¹²⁵ *Si krung*, 15 June 1928; *KDM*, 30 June 1928. In recognition of this, the *Nangsuphim thai* defended regular billiards by presenting an extensive comparison of the two games to show how they differed. *NT*, 13 June 1928.

¹²⁶ *Lak muang*, 15 Oct. 1928.

¹²⁷ *KDM*, 27 Sept. 1928.

¹²⁸ *Bangkok kanmuang*, 6 Feb. 1929.

gambling policy in the 1930s. As mentioned in Chapter 3, the proposal for the 'Little Heaven' casino in Bangkok met its end due to public opposition. A letter by 'Small Flutter' to the *Bangkok Times* gives some indication of how this was voiced. First, the writer questioned why that paper had not condemned 'a former Minister [for] allowing his name to be associated with a project, the aims and objects of which, most of us believe, are simply to encourage gambling of the worst type.' Then he took aim at the promoters of the scheme:

One cannot understand their motive for trying to mulct the poor people of their hard-earned cash. Would it not be better for them [the promoters] to risk some of their superfluous cash in real industrial enterprises which may enable some of the unemployed to find work? The more one thinks over this question, the more one becomes convinced that the establishment of casinos in Siam would indeed be a tragedy.¹²⁹

The establishment of the first government-run casinos in 1939 seems to have engendered a lukewarm response from the public. As 'Hermit', who was apparently a Thai judge from Songkhla and a regular contributor to the *Bangkok Times*, noted, 'The respectable classes are against the scheme, while the easy-going class are in favour of it; but they seem to agree that Hua Hin casino will not be sufficiently well supported by the type of visitors required by the scheme. If we must have a casino, Singora [Songkhla] should be the first choice.'¹³⁰ While it is unlikely that such sentiments were a critical factor behind the Phibun regime's decision to abandon the casino project, this indicates a widespread assumption that, irrespective of its merits, the scheme was destined to fail. Lastly, when the Bangkok casinos set up by the Khuang Aphaiwong government during the latter years of the Second World War were closed in June 1945, the *Thai mai* newspaper welcomed the news and was

¹²⁹ *BTWM*, 25 May 1934.

¹³⁰ *BTWM*, 2 May 1939.

confident the people would be united in celebration.¹³¹ Clearly, the casino project had little support in the press.

The Whisper of the Silent Majority

Attempting to pin down something as nebulous and ephemeral as public opinion in late nineteenth and early twentieth century Siam is nigh on impossible. When newspapers claimed that the public was behind a particular initiative or reported the general feelings on a particular topic, it is difficult to know who exactly made up this public or shared these feelings. A conservative assessment would be that the press was really speaking only about and for its readership. Another collection of sources employed herein are letters, most of them anonymous, from members of the public to the authorities complaining, for instance, about a local fish-fighting den and the unsavoury characters it attracted or a government official abusing the procedure for issuing gambling permits.¹³² These present snapshots into the mind of the writer but in most cases it is unclear who they were and just how representative their views were of the broader population. Apart from these sources, however, the historical record provides scant insight into what the ordinary Siamese person thought. With these problems and limitations in mind, this section will attempt to capture some of the opinions of the broader, predominantly rural Siamese population on gambling and related government policy, and determine what influence the common man had on that policy.

Gambling obviously provoked an array of differing views and feelings among the various sections of Siamese society. At one extreme were the professional gamblers and its promoters, denizens of the gambling houses before their termination

¹³¹ *Thai mai*, 5 June 1945.

¹³² NA R.6 N.42/37, 'A "Gentleman" to Phraya Phetchapani, 28 April 1917'; NA R.6 N.42/26, 'The Oppressed to Yomarat, 20 Sept. 1915'.

and patrons of the underground dens that sprung up after. For them, gambling was their life and their livelihood. These people appear in the historical record primarily as statistics for gambling convictions. At the other were those people who considered gambling to be an evil that was, at best, retarding Siam's development or, at worst, slowly destroying the country. Such people might have been members of the Anti-Gambling League, which, under the leadership of Prince Damrong, was established around the turn of the twentieth century to press for the abolition of the gambling tax farms. Beyond a few cursory references, there is little information on this organisation or its membership, however.¹³³ But, given its royal connections, it can be surmised that it was an elite movement. Between these two extremes was the bulk of the population, many of whom may have gambled occasionally: playing cards during the Songkran festival, purchasing the odd lottery ticket, or frequenting the gaming stalls at the Winter Fair, for instance. Others might not have gambled but saw little harm in it as long as it was not done to excess. Contemporary Western commentators may have depicted the Siamese as oblivious to the potential harm gambling could cause but, as Hong Lysa has shown, this was partly to reinforce 'the essential unfathomable difference' between East and West and to illustrate how Asian subjects subscribed to a different moral code that was impenetrable to the Western mind.¹³⁴ This was a strategy for emphasising Western superiority and says more about the colonial mindset than that of the Siamese. For those that had to live with an inveterate gambler, the damaging effects of their pastime – debt, poverty, theft, and bankruptcy – were all too apparent. For those with no firsthand experience, the evils of

¹³³ BTWM, 15 June 1904; W. A. Graham, *Siam: A Handbook of Practical, Commercial and Political Information*, London: Alexander Moring, 1924, vol. 1, p. 340.

¹³⁴ Hong Lysa, "'Stranger within the Gates': Knowing Semi-Colonial Siam as Extraterritorials', *Modern Asian Studies*, 38, 2 (2004), pp. 341-2. To illustrate this point, Hong presents an almost farcical scene from the British Consular Court in which the judge tries in vain to make a Siamese woman see the error of her ways in sending one of her young sons to place a stake on the *huai* lottery.

unchecked gambling were conveyed through proverbs and fables. Take the following saying for example:

If bandits plunder your home, you will have no property to use (*Tuk chon phlon, mai mi khong cha chai*).

If a fire should burn, you will have no house in which to live (*Tuk phai mai, mai mi ruan cha yu*).

If you lose at *po*, you will have no land on which to live (*Tuk po kin, mai mi phaen-din cha yu*).¹³⁵

In this hierarchy of disasters, gambling is the worst because, unlike the other two, it leaves its victims with nothing at all with which to rebuild their lives.¹³⁶

Attitudes and opinions on gambling varied depending on the form. As noted in Chapter 1, the *huai* lottery had a much broader appeal than the gambling houses. Indeed, there are some tantalising hints of public antipathy and opposition towards the latter. While visiting a town near Chiang Mai in the late nineteenth century, Holt Samuel Hallett learnt that tax farmers had been prevented from setting up gambling houses and opium dens 'by common consent'.¹³⁷ After all the gambling houses were closed in the southern monthons of Nakhon Si Thammarat and Chumphon in 1898, a missionary observed that: 'Regular *nakleng* gamblers are feeling rather sore over it, but the better class of people express great satisfaction and approval of the improvement this has wrought in the life of the people and in their general prosperity'.¹³⁸ Similarly, when all the provincial gambling houses were finally closed in 1906, public celebrations, organised by local governors, were staged in several central provinces. These involved religious ceremonies, such as the honouring of Buddha images and the giving of alms to monks, sporting contests, and theatrical performances. At the event in Ayutthaya, there were also hot-water baths and a

¹³⁵ Phra Thepphawethi, *Thot khong kanphanan* [The Evils of Gambling], Bangkok, 1940, p. 5.

¹³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 6.

¹³⁷ Hallett, *Thousand Miles*, p. 366.

¹³⁸ *BTWM*, 3 Oct. 1898.

doctor's surgery, where medicine was distributed.¹³⁹ Although many people attended and it is tempting to see their attendance as approval for government policy, it should be noted that these celebrations were held during the Songkran festival, a time of year traditionally associated with fun and games, and people may have been lured by the attractions rather than the cause. Nevertheless, these examples suggest there was a background hum of disapproval for the gambling houses.

In contrast, card playing seems to have been universally popular during the first decades of the twentieth century. This popularity may have been due in part to hardcore gamblers taking up different games following the closures of the gambling houses but the widespread passion for cards in particular stemmed from its social function. There was even a poem extolling the joys of playing cards.¹⁴⁰ Indeed, it has been suggested that the concession under the 1930 law for unlicensed card playing between family and friends, or in private members clubs, was a result of this popularity.¹⁴¹ Attitudes change with time, however. By the mid-1930s, the lack of restraint led to disgust and a public backlash, perhaps best illustrated by a popular song in which a man admonishes his wife, a regular patron of card dens, for neglecting their family, that sold extremely well on vinyl.¹⁴² Around the same time, the constitutional regime annulled the concession for unlicensed card playing. This indicates how government policy was occasionally in tune with public opinion.

For the most part, however, the stance of the government and the attitudes of the mass population were not in unison. The loudest manifestation of this discord was the cacophony produced by contraventions of, and convictions under, the gambling laws. Throughout the 1920s and 1930s, gambling offences were consistently one of

¹³⁹ NA R.5 Kh.14.1.Kh/18, 'Damrong to Sommot, 27 April 1906', 'Commissioner of monthon Ayutthaya, 18 April 1906', 'Damrong to Sommot, 2 May 1906'.

¹⁴⁰ Anek, [Thai Card Games], p. 13.

¹⁴¹ Ibid., p. 14.

¹⁴² Ibid., p. 15.

the top three classes of offences in terms of the number of people convicted.¹⁴³ Of course, this was but a fraction of the number gambling illegally. Unfortunately, these statistics do not give any indication of the exact nature and circumstances of the offence, or the sentence imposed. Nevertheless, it is reasonable to assume most convictions were for minor infringements of the gambling law committed by ordinary people, some perhaps ignorant of the law, who had the misfortune to be caught gambling illegally in the wrong place and at the wrong time. In support of this assessment, one Western judicial adviser attributed the sharp rise in the number of revenue convictions between 1902/3 and 1903/4 – from 234 to 1,150 – to the implementation of the 1902 gambling law in Bangkok:

The general license to indulge in gambling with dice and cards granted during the new-year holidays was this year regulated more precisely as to time, and hundreds found themselves in the lock-up for gambling either before the official time had begun or after it expired.¹⁴⁴

Clearly, people continued to gamble even when it was in contravention of the law, though this was probably due not so much to ignorance or outright defiance as to indifference. Although the government may have branded certain forms of gambling as illegal because they were considered to be undesirable and harmful to society, many did not share these views. Indeed, if the aim of the government's gambling policy was to change people's behaviour, then it is fair to say that for the period covered by this study it failed. That certain games continued to be played long after they had been prohibited is one of the clearest indications of this failure. In February 1940, for example, 15 people were arrested for playing *po kam*, some fifty years after that game had been confined to the gambling houses and nearly twenty-five years

¹⁴³ The other two classes were offences against property and offences in contravention of the opium and excise laws. See *SY 1924-25*, pp. 248-9; *SY 1929-30*, pp. 302-3; *SY 1931-33*, pp. 354-5; *SY 1933-35*, pp. 370-1; *SY 19373/8-1938/39*, pp. 358-9.

¹⁴⁴ *Ministry of Justice Report for the Year 122 (1903-04)*, p. 8.

after it had been banned.¹⁴⁵ And this was not an isolated incident: underground *huai* lotteries continued to be run into the 1940s, if not longer.¹⁴⁶ This suggests that for many the kingdom's gambling laws lacked legitimacy. In other words, although certain games and actions were proscribed by legislation, this did not mean that the Siamese people necessarily saw those games or actions as criminal.

Some of the ruses illegal gamblers used to evade the law have already been discussed in Chapter 4. Perhaps none were more effective than those that targeted the state officials charged with detecting and suppressing illegal gambling. As a woman from Bang Chan, a village once on the outskirts of Bangkok, explained in 1953:

We have always played cards in this part of Bang Chan.... If the police came to arrest people, we would pay them or give them food or drink.... Some police wanted to play cards and made good money gambling. When such a policeman came along, he took off his hat and held it high on a pole to warn us he was coming, then we could see over the tall grass. People would stop and invite him to come in.¹⁴⁷

With those state officials who were not so susceptible to bribery, meanwhile, people used other tactics to prevent them from doing their jobs. One Siamese commentator who had travelled widely throughout the country asserted that *kamnans* and village headmen were reluctant to arrest illegal gamblers in their localities because those gamblers came from within their own social circle. These grassroots officials feared that if they were to carry out their duties fully, then they might be ostracised from their own communities.¹⁴⁸ Moreover, the commentator highlighted how villagers used malicious gossip and slander to undermine the authority of local officials who put

¹⁴⁵ *BTWM*, 24 Feb. 1940.

¹⁴⁶ *BTWM*, 5 Feb. 1940.

¹⁴⁷ Sharp and Hanks, *Bang Chan*, pp. 127-8.

¹⁴⁸ *Si krung*, 12 May 1928. This is indicative of the contradiction between the traditional and modern roles of the village headman. Within the village community, the headman had traditionally been the defender of local interests; indeed, his authority depended on him being a strong leader who could protect the village from outsiders and state impositions. Conversely, the rapidly centralising Siamese state of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century saw the headman as the means for articulating its demands and enforcing its will. See Chaiyan Rajchagool, *The Rise and Fall of the Thai Absolute Monarchy*, Bangkok: White Lotus, 1994, pp. 102-3.

their duty to the state before their perceived responsibility to their communities. He gave the example of a particularly strict *kamnan* who arrested people without bias and had consequently been dubbed a jobs-worth and ridiculed by local people.¹⁴⁹ This name-calling is a classic example of what James C. Scott has termed 'weapons of the weak', meaning techniques employed by the poor and downtrodden to ensure that those in their communities who are better off and more powerful conform to certain social norms.¹⁵⁰ The use of such tactics to subvert the enforcement of Siam's gambling laws reinforces the argument that those laws were not in accord with the worldview of many Siamese people. For them, the gambling laws were an unwelcome and unrealistic imposition of the state.

But while some aspects of government attempts to restrict gambling may have been unpopular, the legitimacy of that policy was rarely openly questioned. One of the few exceptions to this stemmed from the 1939 prohibition on cockfighting imposed by the Phibun regime. This move provoked written protests from a group of northern farmers, who sent a petition bearing almost one hundred signatures to the Ministry of the Interior, and from the MP for the southern province of Nakhon Si Thammarat. Their principal objection to the ban was that cockfighting was a genuine, traditional Thai sport that had gone on since ancient times. Both parties also framed their protests in terms of agricultural development: fighting cocks were an indigenous breed and, since the prohibition, the Thai chicken breeding industry had gone into decline.¹⁵¹ The ban on cockfighting was thus perceived and portrayed as an attack

¹⁴⁹ The exact name this official had been given was '*khun hoe yot tamlai yat*', which can be literally translated as 'Sir So Excessively Proud of His Position that He Destroys His Relatives'. *Si krung*, 12 May 1928.

¹⁵⁰ James C. Scott, *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1984, esp. pp. 22-5, 234-5, 282.

¹⁵¹ NA MT.0201.1.1/1577, Nai Khwai Kaenkaeo, Nai Tan Wongbaipet and associates to Minister of the Interior, 24 Sept. 1940'; NA MT.0201.1.1/1579, 'MP for Nakhon Si Thammarat to Minister of the Interior, 23 Sept. 1940'.

upon Thai identity. The government was not swayed by these arguments, however, and the ban remained in place.¹⁵² Presumably, this did not stop people from staging cockfights and, given the fact that they continue to this day, the prohibition eventually fell into abeyance.

As noted in Chapter 4, gambling by government officials was a major concern among some sections of the public. From the mid-1910s, there was a steady stream of anonymous letters to the administration accusing certain officials of having gambling problems, running illicit gambling rings, covering up for others involved in such enterprises, or neglecting their suppression duties.¹⁵³ Sometimes these claims were just part of a longer list of charges of official corruption and abuse.¹⁵⁴ It is not clear in all cases whether the authorities investigated these allegations, though it seems that the constitutional regime took them more seriously than its absolutist predecessor. When there was an investigation, the authorities usually found there was no factual basis for the allegations or, if there were hints of malpractice, not enough evidence for any action to be taken against the accused.¹⁵⁵ Questions could naturally be raised about the rigour and impartiality of the investigators. For instance, in January 1940 the governor of Pathum Thani province was accused of being a hardcore gambler who would compel other officials to play cards illegally. The only step the Ministry

¹⁵² NA MT.0201.1.1/1577, 'Secretary of Minister of Interior to Nai Khwai and associates, 3 Oct. 1940'; NA MT.0201.1.1/1579, 'Secretary of Minister of Interior to MP for Nakhon Si Thammarat, 3 Oct. 1940'.

¹⁵³ See for example NA R.6 N.42/32, 'An Honest Person to the Minister of Local Government, July 1916'; NA R.6 N.42/95, 'Anonymous letter from people of Pak Klong Phra Khanong, 22 March 1925'; NA MT.0201.1.1/185, 'Anonymous letter, 9 Oct. 1936'; NA MT.0201.1.1/1354, 'People of Sukhothai to Phibun, 1 Dec. 1939'. People may have made similar anonymous accusations before the 1910s but no examples were found during the archival research for this study.

¹⁵⁴ See for instance NA R.6 N.42/85, 'Mr Watching the Government to the Minister of the Interior, 19 June 1923'; NA R.6 N.42/92, 'The People, 25 June 1925'; NA R.6 N.42/114, 'The People of Phra Pradaeng province'; NA MT.0201.1.1/2, 'Villagers of tambon Talat Mai to PM, 18 Feb. 1934'; NA MT.0201.1.1/898, 'Nai Sawat to Chaikan, 3 Aug. 1938'; NA MT.0201.1.1/1007, 'Nai Lek to Phibun, 1 March 1939'.

¹⁵⁵ See for example NA MT.0201.1.1/2, 'Ang Thong Provincial Committee to Undersecretary of the Interior, 13 June 1934'; NA MT.0201.1.1/1007, 'Ang Thong Provincial Committee to Director-General of the Department of the Interior, 27 July 1939'.

of the Interior apparently took was to ask the governor to explain himself. In response he produced a number of letters from various senior provincial officials and the police rebutting the allegations.¹⁵⁶ In some cases, the allegations arose from a misunderstanding on the part of the accuser. In 1940, for example, the deputy governor of Phrae province was accused of quashing a case against five officials who had been arrested for illegal gambling in a social club.¹⁵⁷ The governor's subsequent investigation concluded that there had been no perversion of justice. The officials had merely been playing cards for cigarettes and alcohol; according to the public prosecutor and a judge this was not against the law and thus there was no basis for a criminal case.¹⁵⁸

It is tempting to see these letters as indications of public antipathy to gambling or, at the very least, towards gambling by officials, and as indirect expressions of support for the government's restrictionist policy. For some, this certainly seems to have been the case. During the Seventh Reign clampdown on officials engaging in any form of gambling, the wife of a government clerk wrote to the *Lak muang* newspaper listing officials she had seen gambling on billiards. As she explained, she was not doing this for malicious reasons. Rather, her husband had become involved with this betting and had blown his salary; the couple now did not have enough money for food and were in debt.¹⁵⁹ Similarly, some wrote out of apparent concern for the negative effects that the gambling habits of government officials might have on their work and the government's reputation.¹⁶⁰ Others had more malign motives,

¹⁵⁶ NA MT.0201.1.1/1221 Undersecretary of the Interior to Governor of Pathum Thani, 27 Jan. 1940', 'Governor of Pathum Thani to Undersecretary of the Interior, 8 Feb. 1940'.

¹⁵⁷ NA MT.0201.1.1/1581, 'Anonymous letter to PM, 15 May 1940', 'Undersecretary of the Interior to Khanakrommakhan Phrae province, 5 June 1940'.

¹⁵⁸ NA MT.0201.1.1/1581, 'Governor of Phrae to Undersecretary of the Interior, 14 June 1940'.

¹⁵⁹ NA R.7 M.26.2/6, 'Extract from *Lak muang*, 22 Jan. 1927'.

¹⁶⁰ NA MT.0201.1.1/1354, 'People of Sukhothai to Phibun, 1 Dec. 1939'; NA MT.0201.1.1/1221, 'Nai Prasert to PM, Jan. 1940'.

though. By the late 1920s, the public had become aware that the government took a dim view of its officials gambling and that those so accused faced severe disciplinary action. Some people may therefore have made false allegations against particular officials in order to discredit them and undermine the local administration; indeed, this was just the conclusion reached by an investigation into the conduct of the district chief of Damnoen Saduak and his wife, who had allegedly won on an underground *huai* lottery.¹⁶¹ Similarly, the governor of Pathum Thani referred to above concluded that claims of him being an inveterate gambler had been cooked up by illegal gamblers in retaliation for the hard-line stance he had taken in suppressing their activities.¹⁶² In this milieu of accusations and counter-claims it is difficult to determine who was telling the truth. What is clear, however, is that common people realised that they could use the government's anti-gambling policy and legislation for their own ends, to sully the reputations of local elites and possibly cause them to be removed from office or transferred.¹⁶³ The gambling laws and government policy enabled people to turn the tables on officials. Like successive governments, the mass population may thus have considered gambling to be a crime only when it suited their own interests: a little light gambling on cards between family and friends was perfectly acceptable but for government officials to do the same was not. In short, people's opinions on gambling were often contradictory and as varied as the myriad forms of gambling.

The emergent popular press in early twentieth century Siam had both a short-term impact on the government's gambling policy, through provocative campaigns

¹⁶¹ NA MT.0201.1.1/297, 'Ratchaburi Provincial Committee to Undersecretary of the Interior, 15 Aug. 1936'.

¹⁶² NA MT.0201.1.1/1221, 'Governor of Pathum Thani to Undersecretary of the Interior, 8 Feb. 1940'.

¹⁶³ Of all the anonymous letters used in this section, there was only one that resulted in an official being dismissed from office. See NA R.6 N.42/103, 'Report No. 3360, 17 Feb. 1937.

highlighting the 'evils' of a particular form of gambling that then led to that form's regulation or prohibition, and a long-term influence, through piercing critiques of the hypocrisy and moral turpitude engendered by gambling that then resulted in the government regulating the behaviour of its officials more strictly. These criticisms were but one symptom of a broader and more deep-seated disenchantment with absolutist society. The mass population, meanwhile, exerted a more subtle and indirect influence as the government sought to accommodate popular tastes while trying to eliminate undesirable, 'criminal' behaviour. Moreover, the common people were not merely passive subjects of gambling laws imposed from above: in some instances, they used those laws to make government officials accountable for their behaviour. The gambling policy of successive governments was constantly evolving as a response to changes in Siamese society.

Conclusion

Gambling is the heritage of mankind. Lucidness or wit may help some escape from ruin, but most of us human beings must keep on gambling. Wherever gambling is illegal, it must be carried out secretly. If the authorities in Siam were serious about arresting gamblers, the kingdom's jails would overflow.

Arkartdamkeung Rapheephat, *The Circus of Life*¹

The setting is Monte Carlo, probably sometime in the 1920s, and Wisoot, the protagonist of Arkartdamkeung Rapheephat's ground-breaking 1929 novel *The Circus of Life* (*Lakhon haeng chiwit*), is moved to make the above observation whilst morbidly contemplating the ruin caused by unchecked gambling in the resort's casinos. It is one of many occasions in the novel where the distinction between fiction and fact becomes blurred and where Wisoot's voice seems to become that of the author. Indeed, the story of Wisoot's life closely shadows that of Arkart, and, as Marcel Barang notes, even at the time of its release, 'the novel was widely perceived as a thinly disguised autobiography'.² A love of gambling is not the least of the similarities between creator and creation, though in the author's case it had tragic consequences. Arkart was born in November 1905; his father was Prince Rabi (Ratburi Direkrit), one of Chulalongkorn's many sons and the Minister of Justice from 1896 to 1910. According to Arkart, the two were never close and his sense of estrangement from his father was compounded when his parents divorced in 1918. Arkart then went to live with his mother, who had been accused by her husband of

¹ Arkartdamkeung, *The Circus of Life*, p. 195.

² Marcel Barang, 'Preface' in Arkartdamkeung, *The Circus of Life*, p. 9. Rachel Harrison has also commented upon the novel's 'semi-autobiographical' nature. See Rachel Harrison, 'Between East and West' in Monique Zaini-Lajoubert (ed.), *États et littérature en Asie: L' émergence des états modernes*, Paris: Les Indes Savantes, 2003, esp. pp. 179-182. Details of Arkart's life are drawn from these two sources.

being an inveterate gambler. It is from her that Arkart is said to have acquired his passion for gambling. In 1924, he went to study in England, before moving on to Georgetown University in the United States. Returning to Bangkok via Japan in 1928, Arkart then entered government service and proceeded to write his masterpiece *The Circus of Life*, in which he draws heavily on his experiences of life overseas to depict Wisoot's own journey around the world. However, after incurring substantial debts, and having been implicated in a string of financial scandals, he fled to Hong Kong in 1931, from where he often visited the casinos in Macao. Arkart committed suicide in May 1932.³ Wisoot's description of gamblers that had lost everything in Monte Carlo's casinos and then taken their own lives thus seems chillingly prescient.⁴ What makes the novel most remarkable, though, is its international scope: by venturing overseas, Wisoot gains the perspective to offer constructive criticisms of Siamese society, with the practice of polygamy coming in for particular condemnation.⁵ *The Circus of Life* thus suggests Arkart's desire for social change and it is in this light that Wisoot's comments on gambling should be considered.

The quote is insightful on a number of levels. Firstly, Arkart displays a profound recognition of gambling's fundamental human appeal and, stemming from this, the futility of attempts to restrict it. Secondly, in questioning the authorities' resolve in arresting illicit gamblers, he alludes to the corruption arising from gambling's illegality in a very matter-of-fact, non-condemnatory manner. On a deeper level, however, this statement challenges the Siamese government's very commitment to the suppression of gambling: was it truly serious about restricting gambling? In turn, this raises questions about the real purpose of government policy,

³ Arkart was not the only member of his family whose life was blighted by gambling. His eldest brother had a passion for horse-racing which led to him gambling away his entire inheritance and the family home.

⁴ Harrison, 'Between East and West', p. 180.

⁵ Ibid., pp. 172-3.

and whether or not the government was successful in achieving those aims. Moreover, by asserting that 'the kingdom's jails would overflow' if all illicit gamblers were imprisoned, Arkart is making an assumption about the amount of illegal gambling in Siam. But was it really as great as he implies and members of the political elite and literati claimed? More importantly, was the Siamese population's gambling habit actually as problematic and harmful as was depicted? These are some of the questions to be addressed in this conclusion, which, following Wisoot's lead, will also look overseas so as to gain new perspectives on gambling in Siam.

Gambling in Siam in Perspective

In order to evaluate the success of the Siamese government's gambling policy, it is first necessary to clarify what the ruling elite actually wished to achieve. As should be familiar by now, they considered gambling to be a social evil that was a potent source of crime, poverty and, before its final formal abolition in 1905, debt slavery. Moreover, gambling encouraged moral laxity and indolence amongst the population and, through a combination of all these factors, retarded economic development. At times, it is almost as if gambling was held to be the cause of all Siam's ills, a view the ruling elite shared with missionaries, foreign advisers and the emergent indigenous middle class. Indeed, such a view of gambling was repeated mantra-like in government reports, travelogues and newspapers until it became a self-evident truth that required no explanation.⁶ It thereby followed that if gambling could be

⁶ For instance, in his 1905 report on alternative sources of revenue to the gambling house tax farms, F. H. Giles stated: 'The evils of gambling and their effect on the plastic nature of the people... are too well known to require any comment here.' NA R.5 Kh.14.1.Kh/18, 'Memorandum containing proposals as to the manner in which revenue can be raised to supply the deficiency which will be caused by the abolition of the gambling houses in the provinces.' Similarly, the report of the annual meeting of local authorities for 1924/5 noted that it was already known to what extent gambling was an evil and an enemy of good governance but then went on to reiterate its supposedly damaging social and economic effects anyway. NA R. 6 N.11.5.Ch/17, 'Ministry of the Interior Consultation on Class 2 Gambling.'

restricted or even eliminated, then poverty and crime would be reduced and Siam's prosperity assured. The reality was a little different, however.

A lack of comprehensive statistical information on the volume of gambling in Siam, the amount of crime, levels of poverty, and the incidence of debt slavery makes it extremely difficult to evaluate the success of the government's restrictionist policy towards gambling or to judge the extent to which it was based on accurate perceptions.⁷ Indeed, this dearth of statistics indicates that government policy was based predominantly on general impressions rather than hard facts. Naturally, this had profound implications, allowing different groups of people to make largely unsubstantiated claims about gambling and its effects in order to advance personal or institutional interests. It has already been noted in Chapter 5 that some newspaper commentators exaggerated the damage caused by gambling and, on occasion, even resorted to outright fabrication in order to drive home their point. It would be unfair and naïve to assume they were the only ones to do so. The reasons for this and its effects will be considered later but first it is necessary to try and determine the actual impact of government policy.

Turning first to the issue of gambling as a cause of debt slavery, it can be suggested that the gradual closure of the gambling houses in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries did little to reduce this form of human bondage, for the simple reason that it was implemented too late to have much effect. The main impetus for the abolition of slavery came from a decree issued by Chulalongkorn in 1874. This ruled that anyone born a hereditary slave from 1868 onwards would gain their liberty at the age of 21 and, more pertinently with regards to gambling, any free person born after 1868 could not sell themselves or be sold into slavery upon

⁷ David Dixon makes note of this lack of statistics on gambling, and its implications, in his study of attitudes and reactions to betting in England and Wales between the 1890s and 1930s. Dixon, *From Prohibition to Regulation*, pp. 9-10.

reaching 21. While the 1874 decree did not affect existing debt slaves and still allowed parents to sell their children into slavery, it seems that it did have a significant indirect impact on this latter practice. Indeed, many people mistakenly believed that the decree had actually forbidden the buying and selling of children born after 1868, leading some to complain about the difficulties of finding a buyer in order to service or discharge a debt.⁸ By the time the final abolition decree was issued in 1905, the number of slaves and potential slaves had been greatly diminished.⁹ Given that the initial closures of the Bangkok gambling houses during the late 1880s and early 1890s probably did little to reduce gambling in the capital and that the first provincial dens were closed only in 1898, it is difficult to see how these moves had more than a negligible impact upon debt slavery.

Similarly, there are few firm indications that the government's attempts to restrict and regulate gambling had much effect upon crime rates or levels of poverty in Siam. Indeed, both of these social problems, and fluctuations in their prevalence, arise from a wide range of socio-economic factors, of which gambling can reasonably be considered only a minor one at best. Throughout the period covered by this study, the incidence of crime appears to have grown inexorably almost year-on-year. The most comprehensive and complete statistics on criminal behaviour for early twentieth century Siam are those showing the number of people convicted for criminal offences: this figure increased almost tenfold during the first four decades of the twentieth century, from 11,353 convictions in 1903/4 to well over 100,000 a year in the second half of the 1930s.¹⁰ To a certain extent, this was a reflection of Siam's

⁸ Chatchai, 'Siamese "Slavery"', pp. 235-7.

⁹ Ibid., pp. 7, 269-78. Baker and Pasuk observe that by the turn of the twentieth century, 'Only a few ageing debts slaves and war captives now remained'. Baker and Pasuk, *Thailand*, p. 61. Slavery was not abolished completely in the north of Siam until 1912.

¹⁰ The figure for 1903/4 is taken from the *Ministry of Justice Report for the Year 122 (1903-04)*, p. 13, and the approximation for the 1930s from the *SY 1937-38 & 1938-39*, p. 358.

growing population, which increased from about 8.1 million in 1910 to around 14.5 in 1937.¹¹ However, the amount of convictions grew at a far greater rate than the population: from 36.82 convictions per 10,000 people in 1911/12 to 77.04 in 1937/8.¹² In other words, a higher proportion of people were being convicted for criminal offences in the late 1930s than in the early 1910s. Of course, these statistics for convictions may well reflect more the activities and attitudes of the police and the judiciary than the incidence of crime. Besides reflecting institutional biases, crime statistics in general are subject to a number of other variables, such as changes in the methods of recording crime and administrative reforms within police forces and judiciaries.¹³ As was recognised at the time, the rise in the number of reported crimes and the number of criminal cases brought before the Siamese courts in the 1900s were largely due to increasing public confidence in the police, improvements in detection and prosecution, and the expanding territorial jurisdiction of the Ministry of Justice.¹⁴ Despite these factors, both Siamese and Western government officials believed the rate of crime in the country was rising and maintained that gambling was a primary cause.¹⁵ In his report on the police for the year 1919/20, Lawson, then in his role as adviser to the Ministry of Local Government, observed a worrying increase in crime over the previous ten years: reproduced below is a table showing the incidence of serious offences for this period.

¹¹ Wyatt, *Thailand*, p. 301.

¹² The 1911/12 figure is a result of calculations based on the population and conviction figures from *SY 1916*, pp. 16, 193, and the 1937/8 figure is taken straight from *SY 1937-38 & 1938-39*, p. 359.

¹³ For discussions of the problems in interpreting crime statistics see, for instance, V. A. C. Gatrell and T. B. Hadden, 'Criminal statistics and their interpretation' in E. A. Wrigley (ed.), *Nineteenth Century Society: Essays in the Use of Quantitative Methods for the Study of Social Data*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1972, esp. pp. 350-8; and Eric Monkkonen, 'Systematic Criminal Justice History: Some Suggestions', *Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, 9, 3 (Winter 1979), pp. 451-64.

¹⁴ *RPAB 1899-1900*, p. 21; *Ministry of Justice Report for the Year 122 (1903-04)*, p. 8; *Ministry of Justice Report for the Year 123 (1904-05)*, pp. 5, 11; *Ministry of Justice Report for the Year 126 (1907-08)*, pp. 7-8.

¹⁵ See for instance NA R.5 Kh.14.1.Kh/18, 'Damrong to Chulalongkorn, 4 Aug. 1903'; NA R.6 N.4.1/73, 'Trotter to Yomarat, 23 Dec. 1915'; NA R.7 Kh.2/2, 'Ideas about suppressing gambling'.

Table 6.1: Number of Cases of Homicide, Gang Robbery and Robbery between 1909/10 and 1919/20.

<i>Year</i>	<i>Homicide</i>	<i>Gang Robbery</i>	<i>Robbery</i>
1909/10	429	281	310
1910/11	658	598	347
1911/12	661	709	303
1912/13	859	707	346
1913/14	1052	610	296
1914/15	1218	701	345
1915/16	1201	691	448
1916/17	1222	612	665
1917/18	1139	668	404
1918/19	1299	653	405
1919/20	1493	963	559

Source: NA R.6 N.4.1/165, 'A Report on work of Gendarmerie and on the Criminal Statistics of Siam for the year B. E. 2462', p. 62.

Lawson attributed the sharp jump in 1910/11 to the deleterious effects of conscription, introduced for the police force in 1908/9. As noted in Chapter 4, conscripts tended to be ill-disciplined and, due to the low rates of pay, their morale was low, thereby limiting the effectiveness of the police force as a deterrent to crime. The marked rise in 1919/20, meanwhile, was due to habitual criminals interned in the penal settlement on Koh Pai being removed from the island and distributed throughout the country.¹⁶ Interestingly, the cancellation of the concession for unlicensed gambling during the Siamese and Chinese New Years and Songkran in 1913, the abolition of the *huai* lottery in 1916, and the closure of the last Bangkok gambling houses in 1917 do not seem to have made any significant impression on the number of these offences. Indeed, as Lawson and other members of the administration suggested, abolition may actually have encouraged crime, since it

¹⁶ NA R.6 N.4.1/165, 'A Report on work of Gendarmerie and on the Criminal Statistics of Siam for the year B. E. 2462', pp. 62-3.

fuelled an increase in underground gambling dens.¹⁷ Although there may have been some short-term victories in curbing crime, as was believed to be the case following the closure of all gambling houses in the southern monthons of Nakhon Si Thammarat and Chumphon around the turn of the century,¹⁸ in the long term, government policy had little discernible impact.

In spite of what the ruling elite, government officials, foreign advisers and newspaper commentators may have thought, the link between gambling and crime was neither so certain nor clear-cut. As noted in Chapter 1, crimes of acquisition, and theft in particular, were closely associated with gambling. Remarkably, however, the number of people per 10,000 of population convicted for offences against property – theft, snatching and robbery, gang robbery, extortion, cheating and fraud, criminal misappropriation, receiving stolen property, and mischief – remained surprisingly stable between the early 1910s and late 1930s, despite all the changes and initiatives in the government's restriction or promotion of gambling. In 1910/11, the ratio of convictions per 10,000 people for these crimes was 12.91 and the following year it was 14.38.¹⁹ From 1919/20 to 1938/9, this figure then fluctuated between 11.74 (1933/4) and 14.95 (1929/30), the only exception being the year 1920/21 when, for reasons unknown, it soared to 17.89.²⁰ This consistency of convictions for property offences per 10,000 of Siam's population suggests the rate of crimes of acquisition was largely unaffected by the government's attempts to suppress gambling. Additionally, in 1936, the Ministry of the Interior conducted a survey of convicts in 53 prisons to find out what had driven them to crime: factors included revenge

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 66; NA R.7 Kh.2/2, 'Ideas about suppressing gambling'.

¹⁸ NA R.5 Kh.14.1.Kh/18, 'Damrong to Chulalongkorn, 4 Aug. 1903'; 'Damrong to Sommot, 13 Feb. 1904'.

¹⁹ These figures are the result of calculations using the population and crime statistics from *SY 1916*, pp. 16, 192-3; and Wyatt, *Thailand*, p. 301.

²⁰ *SY 1924-25*, p. 249; *SY 1929-30*, p. 303; *SY 1931-33*, p. 355; *SY 1933-35*, p. 371; *SY 1937-38 & 1938-39*, p. 359.

(*khwam akhat*), drunkenness, love, anger, and unemployment. Out of 7,399 cases, the most common answer was poverty, with 1,819 respondents or nearly a quarter of the total. Only 42 prisoners gave gambling as the reason for their criminal behaviour, the least of all the categories.²¹ It could be argued that many might have been forced into crime by gambling induced poverty but this would suggest a surprising lack of self-awareness among those interviewed for this survey. It is more reasonable to conclude that gambling was indeed not the major cause of crime that many in Siam thought it to be.

Similar doubts can be raised about gambling as a prime cause of poverty. Over the course of the previous chapters, numerous examples of its insidious effects – children stealing from parents, starving families, huge gambling debts leading to suicide and so on – have been cited; the overall impression created by government reports and newspaper commentaries is that such happenings occurred with depressing regularity. But this seems unlikely, if only for the simple reason that these examples derived their efficacy as cautionary tales of the dangers of unchecked gambling from their extreme nature. Undoubtedly, some people succumbed to addiction and were ruined by their gambling habit – the case of Arkart discussed in the opening section is testament to that – but it is reasonable to assume that the majority gambled within their means and for the sake of entertainment. Indeed, the idea that gambling was the root of all Siamese society's ills seems to have been based on a misguided and patronising view of the mass population as indolent, irresolute and irresponsible. Perhaps one of the most extreme exponents of such a view was Chao Phraya Wongsanupraphat, a distant cousin of Vajiravudh and government minister during the final years of the Fifth Reign and throughout the Sixth. During his

²¹ NA SR.0201.5/4, 'Report on investigation of reasons for wrongdoing'. The figures in the report are reproduced in English in Landon, *Siam in Transition*, p. 154.

tenure as Minister of Agriculture between 1909 and 1912, he was charged with drawing up proposals for alleviating the economic distress of the Siamese cultivator resulting from the recession in Siam's rice trade during the second half of the 1900s.²² Rice farmers in the Rangsit district of the Central Plain had been particularly hard hit by a series of heavy monsoons that had overwhelmed the 'inadequate and deteriorating drainage facilities' and destroyed their crop.²³ Although Chao Phraya Wongsanupraphat identified a number of reasons for the recession – increases in the rate of land tax, the high exchange value of the baht, and the effects of conscription on rural families, for instance – he primarily blamed the farmers for their own hardship: 'With the gradual development of the gambling habit, all sense of saving and economising for bad times is practically gone. So that when the blow comes it will lay them prostrate.'²⁴ In his study of the recession and the Minister of Agriculture's suggestions for dealing with it, Brown concludes that Chao Phraya Wongsanupraphat's unsympathetic view of the Siamese cultivator blinded him to the necessity of developing an adequate irrigation system and prevented him from formulating an impartial and precise assessment of the causes of the recession, on which a basis for action could be built.²⁵ This hints at one reason why the perceived gambling problem received such prominence in debates on the state of the nation: it was easier for the ruling elite to blame Siam's social and economic troubles on the population's gambling habit than it was to recognise the state's failure to provide and maintain the necessary economic infrastructure.

The Siamese elite's rigid conviction that gambling was the cause of all the country's woes stemmed in part from their educational background and experience of

²² The recession and Chaophraya Wongsanupraphat's proposals are discussed in Ian Brown, *The Elite and the Economy in Siam, c. 1890-1920*, Singapore: Oxford University Press, 1988, pp. 77-88.

²³ Ibid., p. 87.

²⁴ NA R.6 KS.1/4, 'Memorandum on our Domestic Economy'.

²⁵ Brown, *The Elite and the Economy*, pp. 87-8.

the West. From around the 1830s, the elite of King Mongkut's generation acquired a fascination for Western ideas and technology, cultivating contacts with missionaries, such as Dr. Bradley, and other Westerners. The future King Chulalongkorn and his brother princes – most prominently, Damrong and Devawongse – accordingly received an education that combined traditional Siamese elements with modern Western ones. Starting in the last decades of the nineteenth century, young members of the royal family, including nearly all of Chulalongkorn's sons, and the nobility were sent to study in England and other imperial metropolises, with many spending their formative years overseas. For instance, Arkart's father, Prince Rabi, lived in England from the age of 11 to 22, studying law at Oxford before returning to Siam to take up government service in 1896. Significantly, while abroad, he required tuition in the Siamese language to ensure he did not forget his mother tongue.²⁶ With the expansion of the military and civilian bureaucracy in the 1890s and 1900s, increasing numbers of commoners were also given the opportunity for an overseas education. It was in Paris in the mid-1920s where Pridi and Phibun, among others, first discussed their plans to overthrow the absolute monarchy. To a greater or lesser extent, these elite and non-elite Siamese not only acquired Western knowledge and skills but also Western tastes and prejudices. As noted in Chapter 2, for example, it was during his time in England that Vajiravudh became enamoured with participation in sport as a means of promoting camaraderie and restoring the virility, dissipated in part by gambling, of the common Thai man. This bears all the hallmarks of the anti-gambling discourse prevalent in England at the time, in which gambling on professional sport had allegedly superseded taking part in 'manly' outdoor activities and was thus seen

²⁶ Loos, *Subject Siam*, p. 49.

as a threat to masculinity.²⁷ Similarly, it was probably while overseas that Chao Phraya Wongsanupraphat acquired his disdainful opinion of the Siamese cultivator, which, as Brown notes, mirrored European attitudes.²⁸ Upon returning to Siam, it is fair to say that these Westernised Siamese, especially those of high status, had more in common with the foreign advisers who aided them in the process of administrative, legal, and financial reform, than they did with Siam's rural population, to whom – in terms of dress, conduct, and, most significantly, mindset – they were only marginally less alien.²⁹ This cultural distance between rulers and ruled left ample ground for misunderstandings; what the Siamese elite saw as problem gambling may have been nothing of the sort to the Siamese farmer.

More crucially, in late nineteenth and early twentieth century England, if not elsewhere in Europe, conventional wisdom held that gambling, crime and poverty were closely connected. Tellingly, just as in Siam, this link was based on general impressions and statements of opinion rather than on statistical evidence.³⁰ As Dixon puts it while commenting on the Home Office's fierce articulation of this view, 'It was not necessary to *prove* that betting caused crime and other social problems: acceptance of the causal connection was a matter of common sense.'³¹ Since it was established orthodoxy in the seat of empire that gambling was a virulent cause of crime and poverty, it should not be surprising that the Siamese elite adhered to this opinion. Moreover, within Siam the causal connection was reinforced and exaggerated by a range of actors. As already suggested, for the ruling elite, the

²⁷ See Dixon, *From Prohibition to Regulation*, p. 58.

²⁸ Brown, *The Elite and the Economy*, p. 93 n. 113.

²⁹ Batson makes a similar point in regards to the Bangkok appointed Siamese officials who were sent to administer the outlying areas of the kingdom during the late nineteenth century, noting their similarity to the Western colonial officials in other parts of South East Asia. Batson, *End of the Absolute Monarchy*, p. 12.

³⁰ Dixon, *From Prohibition to Regulation*, pp. 194-7.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 197.

gambling problem disguised some of the inadequacies and failures of the state: for instance, it could be claimed that crime was rife because gambling was so prevalent, not because the police force was too small and ill equipped. Conversely, gambling's undesirability gave the constitutional regime of the 1930s the pretext for monopolising the provision of lotteries and other gaming facilities: gambling was an evil but, since it could not be eliminated entirely, it was better that the state, and only the state, provide some tightly regulated outlet for it. For the missionaries and colonialists of the nineteenth century, meanwhile, the Siamese state's reliance on the gambling tax farms was evidence of the backward and exploitative nature of the indigenous regime: the prevalence of gambling justified their presence and possible intervention in the country, while also underlining their supposed superiority. Similarly, for the emerging middle-class intelligentsia of the 1910s and 1920s, the gambling problem gave them grounds to criticise the ruling regime: the absolute monarchy was inimical to the good of the nation partly because it exploited people's love of gambling for revenue purposes. For the undermanned and underpaid police force, the illegality of gambling was both a burden and a blessing: by entering into alliance with illicit gambling promoters, the police were able to regulate gambling to some extent, reduce their workload, and supplement their meagre income. For the ordinary Siamese farmer or Chinese labourer, gambling's illegality enabled them to bring government officials to account: as detailed in Chapter 4, even mere allegations of gambling were sometimes enough for an official to be dismissed from service. From these differing perspectives, the ultimate success or failure of government attempts to restrict gambling becomes immaterial: the gambling issue derived its utility from the mere occurrence of gambling. Moreover, the efficacy of these various strategies depended wholly on gambling being seen to be a social evil that brought

nothing but disaster in its wake. If gambling were seen as a legitimate and relatively innocuous form of entertainment, then it would lose its potency as a political tool. In other words, gambling was a problem largely because it suited people's interests for it to be perceived as a problem. When viewed from another perspective, the prevalence of gambling in Siam/Thailand during the period of this study becomes not the cause of the kingdom's problems but rather a symptom of its growing prosperity and a signifier of its transition to modernity. People gambled more because they had both the money and time to do so: rice farmers could buy lottery tickets with their cash surplus, while clerks in Bangkok could visit the horse-races on their day-off and stake a portion on their favourite. It was less a cause for concern than one for celebration. Tellingly, in the early 1950s, an elderly woman in Bang Chan village observed that: 'Gambling disappeared two years ago. People in the same hamlet used to hear about a game of cards and gather together. Now the money is all gone. There are more poor people.'³² A rise in the cost of living had done what government policy could not.

Gambling in Thailand Today: The Past in the Present

Fast-forward to present day Thailand, however, and the government's attitude and policies towards gambling seem to have changed little, in spite of the wide-ranging socio-economic transformation the country has undergone over the last sixty years. Indeed, the legal and regulatory framework established during the 1930s and 1940s has created an environment in which gambling has become ever more deeply entrenched in the illegal economy. Apart from the twice-monthly state lotteries, the totes on horse-racing and bookmaking on Thai boxing (*muai thai*), most forms of

³² Sharp and Hanks, *Bang Chan*, p. 194.

gambling either remain illegal or are subject to such a complex and restrictive licensing system as to render them virtually so.³³ Nevertheless, gambling remains as prevalent as it did in the past, if not more so: 70 percent of the Thai population are said to take part in the gaming economy.³⁴ Illegal gambling takes three principal forms: gaming in casinos, the underground lottery (*huai tai din*), and betting on football matches. Underground casinos and gambling dens of all sizes, styles and clientele can be found throughout the country. In 1996, it was estimated that there were between 187 and 300 such establishments in Bangkok alone and at least 89 in the provinces.³⁵ These are frequented by people from all walks of life: businessmen, politicians, artists, housewives, office workers, teenage students, and the unemployed. However, the largest illicit gambling enterprise in the country, both in economic and organisational terms, is the underground lottery: Pasuk et al. claim about four million people are involved in its sales and administration network, and it has an estimated annual turnover equivalent to eight percent of GDP.³⁶ The underground lottery is run in tandem with the state lottery, upon which the winning numbers are based. There are various ways of placing a stake: most commonly, punters bet on the last two or three digits of the first prize number in the official draw.³⁷ These variants, and the slightly better odds some offer, make the underground lottery a serious rival to the government one. Furthermore, while state lottery tickets cost 40 baht each, punters can stake just a few baht on its illegal twin, which also pays out more in prize money: 70 to 75 percent of the total money staked as opposed

³³ Pasuk et al., *Guns, Girls, Gambling, Ganja*, pp. 216-17. The Ministry of the Interior no longer grants permits for all the games on List B (games permitted subject to license) of the Gambling Act B. E. 2478, while others can be played only during special occasions. See Lisut, [Gambling Handbook], pp. 88-90.

³⁴ Philip Cornwel-Smith, *Very Thai: Everyday Popular Culture*, Bangkok: River Books, 2005, p. 197.

³⁵ Pasuk et al., *Guns, Girls, Gambling, Ganja*, pp. 33-4.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 45.

³⁷ For a complete description of the different methods of betting, their chances of winning and their return see *ibid.*, pp. 48-50.

to 60 percent.³⁸ A more recent gambling craze is betting on the results of football matches, with games in international tournaments and the English Premier League being the most popular. The development of football gambling is a graphic example of globalisation and has been facilitated by advances in technology: people watch the games on satellite TV, place bets by mobile phone or the Internet, and transfer money electronically.³⁹ It is especially prevalent amongst the young: in the build-up to Euro 2004, there was much concern about teenage schoolboys betting on games and the Bangkok police made a point of targeting areas around Ramkhamhaeng University, where football gambling was said to be rampant.⁴⁰ A poll by the Thai Farmers Bank Research Centre found that Thais were expected to spend up to 33 million baht betting on this tournament, with 62 percent of the respondents saying they would bet between friends and 37 percent saying they would gamble with a bookmaker.⁴¹ Additionally, Thais regularly go abroad to gamble, visiting Macao, Hong Kong, and Las Vegas among other locations.⁴² Closer to home, there are 23 casinos just across the border in Burma, Cambodia, and Laos, many of which are Thai-owned.⁴³ According to the National Economic and Social Development Board (NESDB), nearly three million Thais visited these cross-border establishments in 2001.⁴⁴ Similarly, offshore liners replete with gaming tables ply the Gulf of Thailand.

Huge sums of money are involved in the illegal gambling economy. In 2001, the underground lottery is reckoned to have made 542 billion baht, while recent surveys have placed the turnover of Bangkok casinos at 673 billion baht and of

³⁸ Ibid., pp. 45-6.

³⁹ For a comprehensive study of football gambling see *ibid.*, Ch. 4.

⁴⁰ *BP*, 10 and 12 June 2004.

⁴¹ *BP*, 11 June 2004.

⁴² Pasuk et al., *Guns, Girls, Gambling, Ganja*, pp. 19-20.

⁴³ Pasuk Phongpaichit and Chris Baker, *Thaksin: The Business of Politics in Thailand*, Chiang Mai: Silkworm, 2004, p. 116.

⁴⁴ *BP*, 30 May 2004.

provincial ones at 142 billion.⁴⁵ Moreover, Thais are said to bet over 100 billion baht on football a year.⁴⁶ Finally, in the mid-1990s, an influential owner of a Bangkok casino estimated that the country lost at least 21 billion baht annually because of people going overseas to gamble.⁴⁷ So great is the amount being gambled in foreign casinos that it is claimed to affect the baht exchange rate.⁴⁸ The social cost to the country is also high, with the proceeds from illicit gambling enterprises going to organised crime. Indeed, the government's restrictive policy may inadvertently have nurtured crime syndicates. In the late 1930s, the American academic Kenneth P. Landon claimed that organised crime had yet to gain a foothold in the country.⁴⁹ This assessment appears to be supported by the government reports and other sources used in this study; apart from the Chinese secret societies, large-scale criminal organisations are hardly ever referred to in connection with gambling. It was only in the 1940s and 1950s that organised crime took off in Bangkok, running some casinos and collecting protection money from others.⁵⁰ The organisations behind present-day cross-border casinos are also involved in the drug trade, smuggling, and money laundering.⁵¹ Furthermore, policing illegal gambling is a strain on the police force and diverts precious resources away from the suppression of perhaps more serious crimes. This is to say nothing of the corrupting influence it has upon the police and, since the development of party politics, politicians.

Given the vast sums of potential revenue from gambling the Thai state currently forgoes, along with the economic and social costs of illegal gambling, it is

⁴⁵ Cornwel-Smith, *Very Thai*, p. 199.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 197.

⁴⁷ Pasuk et al., *Guns, Girls, Gambling, Ganja*, pp. 19-20.

⁴⁸ Cornel-Smith, *Very Thai*, 198.

⁴⁹ Landon, *Siam in Transition*, p. 154.

⁵⁰ For details on the growth of Bangkok crime syndicates up to the early 1990s see Pasuk et al., *Guns, Girls, Gambling, Ganja*, pp. 25-33, 39-40.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p. 14.

not surprising that governments frequently contemplate adopting a more liberal stance and legalising casinos in particular.⁵² A 1996 survey conducted by a group of academics at Chulalongkorn University among the Bangkok middle class and opinion makers found a majority in favour of legalising casinos, though people were divided over lifting restrictions on other forms of gambling.⁵³ However, although the case for government-run casinos is persuasive, such proposals have generally attracted fierce criticism and have consequently been shelved. Whereas gambling has been progressively decriminalised in many developed and developing countries over the last half century, Thailand has stood still. Moreover, with the advent of the Internet and online gambling, controlling gambling becomes ever more difficult and unrealistic. The end result is that the Thai government's stance on gambling looks increasingly out-of-date and out-of-step with economic sense, technological developments, and people's behaviour.⁵⁴

Unsurprisingly, the primary impediment to the decriminalisation of gambling in Thailand remains the police force. In 2002, a senior police officer revealed that 'up to 10 gambling dens in Bangkok each pay up to 10 million baht a month for the police force to turn a blind eye.'⁵⁵ Lawson's observation, quoted in Chapter 2, that it was impossible to conduct illicit gambling on any scale without the police knowing about it, remains as true today as it was a hundred years ago. One justification the police use for their 'informal taxes' on casinos is that they do not receive enough money in their budget for crime suppression work, particularly because much of it

⁵² The most recent was the administration of Thaksin Shinawatra (PM from February 2001 to September 2006), a descendant of a Chinese immigrant to Siam in the late nineteenth century who became a gambling house tax farmer, first in Chanthaburi and later in Chiang Mai. On the tax farming career of Thaksin's great grandfather see Pasuk and Baker, *Thaksin*, pp. 26-8.

⁵³ For the details of the survey see Pasuk et al., *Guns, Girls, Gambling, Ganja*, pp. 219-30.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 218.

⁵⁵ Quoted in Cornwel-Smith, *Very Thai*, p. 198.

requires paying informers.⁵⁶ So long as police salaries and budgets remain inadequate, it is not in their interest to see a liberalisation of the kingdom's gambling laws. Similarly, some politicians have close connections with illicit gambling promoters or are themselves involved. The proceeds of the underground lottery are used to buy votes at election time and to finance the campaigns of some candidates. Additionally, the extensive administrative and client network of this enterprise is used as an electioneering machine and vote-bank.⁵⁷ In short, too many influential actors still have a vested interest in the illegality of gambling.

Of course, many people still object to gambling on moral and social grounds. More intriguing though is the way in which the anti-gambling discourse continues to be used to demonise proponents of decriminalisation. The latest public figure to fall victim to such attacks was Thaksin Shinawatra, Thailand's most successful politician at the ballot box and easily one of the most controversial. Following its electoral success in 2001, his Thai Rak Thai (literally, Thai love Thai) party absorbed two other parties to become the first to wield an outright parliamentary majority. Combined with new constitutional provisions designed to strengthen the prime minister and to encourage more stable governments, this meant Thaksin acquired an unprecedented degree of political power for an elected Thai premier.⁵⁸ The manner in which he chose to wield it ensured he had many enemies. Among businessmen involved in the entertainment industry and international investors, it was generally acknowledged that Thaksin represented the best opportunity for legalising casinos.⁵⁹ Such a move was certainly in keeping with the former prime minister's economic policy, branded Thaksinomics, in which he sought to bring illicit business enterprises

⁵⁶ Pasuk et al., *Guns, Girls, Gambling, Ganja*, p. 35.

⁵⁷ On the role of the underground lottery hosts in politics see *ibid.*, pp. 64-8.

⁵⁸ Pasuk and Baker, *Thaksin*, pp. 94-95.

⁵⁹ *Matichon*, 19 Feb. 2003.

above ground in order to contribute to growth and government revenue.⁶⁰ As part of this strategy, in 2003 the Government Lottery Office instituted a large number of draws of two and three digit numbers for fixed prizes in order to undermine the underground lottery, a tactic that met with some success.⁶¹ A year later, the NESDB proposed the establishment of state-run casinos as a means of combating corruption and the underground economy, while also creating jobs and investment.⁶² While controversial, this was totally overshadowed by the uproar caused by the Liverpool Football Club lottery scheme.⁶³ In May 2004, Thaksin, as part of a consortium of Thai Rak Thai billionaires, tried to buy a 30 percent stake in the English Premier League club. After this was denounced as unconstitutional, he announced he was going to purchase the shares on behalf of 'Thailand as a country', using public money. Predictably, this too was denounced, on the grounds that it was inappropriate. Thaksin then proposed raising the funds through a lottery. Tickets would cost 1,000 baht, with a first prize of one billion baht, a second of 100 million, and others going down to 100,000 baht for the last place.⁶⁴ In addition, all purchasers would receive a 200 baht share in the football club. The lottery scheme generated a storm of protest from academics, press commentators, social activists, and students. For instance, the *Khao sot* newspaper pointed out that ticket holders' shares might become worthless due to fluctuations in the London stock exchange and that the proposal totally contradicted the government's campaign to rid the nation of vice, including the underground lottery.⁶⁵ Following criticisms from his one-time mentor, Chamlong

⁶⁰ Pasuk and Baker, *Thaksin*, p. 116.

⁶¹ Ibid.; Cornwel-Smith, *Very Thai*, p. 198.

⁶² *BP*, 30 May & 11 June 2004.

⁶³ Unless indicated the information on the Liverpool lottery scheme is taken from Pasuk and Baker, *Thaksin*, pp. 243-6.

⁶⁴ *BP*, 30 May 2004.

⁶⁵ *Khao sot*, 25 May 2004.

Srimuang, that the scheme would spur greed and incite a lending rush, Thaksin kicked the Liverpool lottery proposal into touch.⁶⁶

The anti-gambling discourse deployed in the recent debates over decriminalisation is little changed from that which was articulated during the period covered by this study. One critic of the Liverpool lottery scheme, for instance, claimed it would 'increase crime, lead to gambling addiction and ruin families.'⁶⁷ As in the past, concerns were raised about gambling's effects on children: it was claimed that if casinos were legalised it would encourage them to believe that gambling was a legitimate activity, with disastrous consequences for society.⁶⁸ Even the new two- and three-digit lottery draws, the revenue from which goes to providing scholarships for the education of children from low-income families, were condemned on similar grounds. At a seminar at Thammasat University, a Bangkok senator argued that: 'doing this is like using money from committing a sin to make merit. It is a way to justify the lottery run. More importantly, it has confused children and caused them to feel grateful to the lottery.'⁶⁹ One slight difference, however, is that a greater emphasis now seems to be placed on the immorality of gambling and how it contravenes Buddhism. Indeed, Thaksin has all but been accused of being a 'bad' Buddhist, with the senator quoted above claiming that the proposals for legalising casinos showed that the premier lacked true understanding of Buddhist principles. Similarly, at the same seminar a Thai academic claimed that the Thaksin government's 'moral standard was lower than its ability to perform economic work' and that it 'had failed to follow Buddhist precepts.'⁷⁰ Proposals for decriminalising gambling were thus evidence of how Thaksin focused only on economic

⁶⁶ *BP*, 4 & 6 June 2004.

⁶⁷ *BP*, 31 May 2004.

⁶⁸ *BP*, 28 March 2004.

⁶⁹ Quoted in *BP*, 13 June 2004.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*

development without considering the social costs of his schemes.⁷¹ Just as the popular press in the 1920s used an anti-gambling discourse to undermine the legitimacy of the absolutist regime, Thaksin's opponents deployed it to illustrate why his premiership was detrimental to the Thai nation and how he personally was morally unfit to govern.

There is one new element in the present-day anti-gambling discourse, though it draws its potency from the past. In February 2003, *Matichon*, a 'quality' newspaper aimed at the urban middle class, ran an article discussing the legalisation of casinos.⁷² Revealingly, the article included a photograph of King Chulalongkorn and opened with a quotation in which he expressed his fears about the spread of gambling within Bangkok. After reporting how the legalisation of casinos was on the political agenda once more, the writer claimed that their proponents were being wilfully ignorant about Chulalongkorn's attitude towards gambling, his policy of closing the dens and his reasons for doing so. The writer went on to quote a lengthy passage from Chulalongkorn's study of the Songkran festival in which the king attributed the longevity of the Chakri dynasty to its determination to rid the country of vice. Chulalongkorn then stated that any member of the royal family or government official that respected the magnanimity of the monarchy should refrain from gambling or seeking to profit from it.⁷³ The article's writer concludes by observing how the great threat posed by gambling that Chulalongkorn had foreseen and tried to forestall was now in danger of coming to pass.⁷⁴ What is striking is that the writer makes no attempt to explain why legalisation might be disadvantageous for present-day Thailand; it is enough to present some examples of Chulalongkorn's thoughts on

⁷¹ In addition to *ibid.*, see also *BP*, 6 June 2004.

⁷² *Matichon*, 19 Feb. 2003.

⁷³ For the original text see Chulalongkorn, [Songkran Ceremonies], pp. 94-6.

⁷⁴ *Matichon*, 19 Feb. 2003.

gambling. In short, the writer's argument amounts to little more than gambling is bad because Chulalongkorn said so. Although never spelt out, and ignoring the historical myopia of the writer, the implications are clear. To be a proponent of decriminalisation is to be not only a 'bad' Buddhist but, even more seriously in a country where the monarchy is highly revered and loyalty to it is considered the very essence of Thai identity, to be anti-monarchist and un-Thai. By contemplating the legalisation of casinos, it was insinuated that Thaksin was challenging the wisdom of Chulalongkorn and, by association, that of the current monarch, King Bhumibol Adulyadej.⁷⁵

The world has turned and turned since the legal and conceptual framework of the Thai government's restrictionist policy on gambling was formulated but, as a consequence of the entrenched interests of the police and politicians and, perhaps just as crucially, the long shadow cast by one of the country's most revered monarchs, the pendulum has yet to swing back.

⁷⁵ As Loos notes, 'The culture industry in Thailand has solidified the link between King Chulalongkorn and Thailand's regnant monarch... making it impossible to critique one without indirectly critiquing the other.' Loos, *Subject Siam*, p. 15.

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The archival research for this study was carried out in the National Archives of Thailand, Bangkok. All archival sources from this source are prefixed with NA and are referenced according to the catalogue system used by the National Archives. Listed below are the file series that were consulted, with their full reference number followed by the titles of each file series and its sub-series.

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- NA R.5 M.2.11 – Administrative Division – Administrative Meetings

Ministry of Local Government (N)

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- NA R.5 N.3.5.K – Provincial Administration in Monthon Krungthep – Pathum Thani - General
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